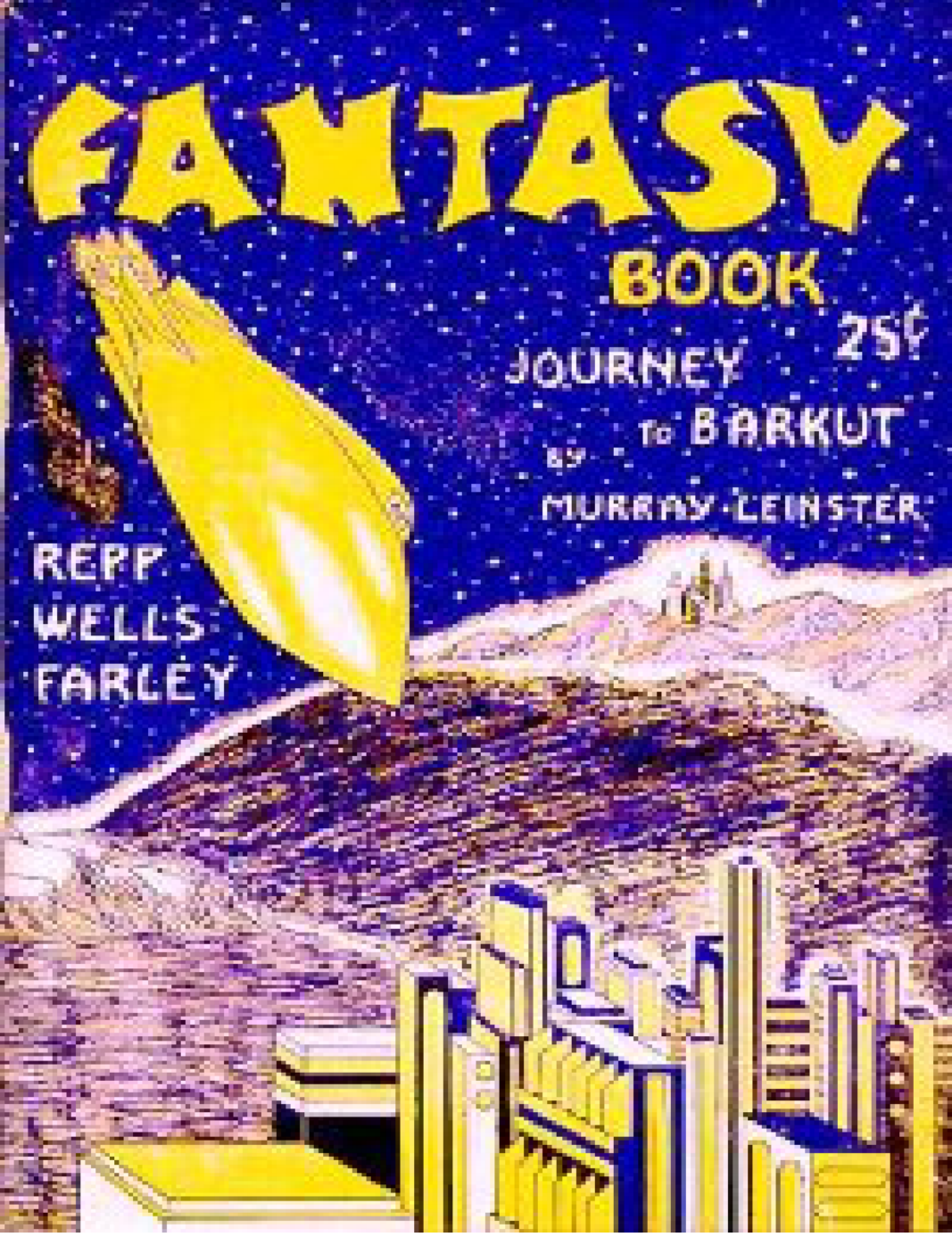
FANTASY
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JOURNEY
TO BARKUT
BY
MURRAY LEINSTER
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- Gateway to Elsewhere
  - Chapter 1
  - Chapter 2
  - Chapter 3
  - Chapter 4
  - Chapter 5
  - Chapter 6
  - Chapter 7
  - Chapter 8
  - Chapter 9
  - Chapter 10
  - Chapter 11
  - Chapter 12
  - Chapter 13
  - Chapter 14
  - Chapter 15
  - Chapter 16
  - Chapter 17
  - Chapter 18
  - Chapter 19
  - Chapter 20

Gateway to Elsewhere
by Murray Leinster

Chapter 1

This is the story of what happened to Tony Gregg after he had learned about the fourth dimension—or maybe it was the fifth or sixth—in a *shishkebab* restaurant in the Syrian quarter on lower East Broadway, New York.

He didn't go to the restaurant originally to learn about the fourth dimension. His first visit was simply for *shishkebab,* which is a wonderful dish of lamb cubes skewered on small round sticks and cooked with an unlikely sauce containing grape leaves. It was quite accidental that he asked the owner of the restaurant about a coin that he—Tony—carried as a luck-piece.

Tony had bought it for a lucky charm in one of those tiny shops on side-streets in New York, where antique jewelry and ivory chessmen and similar wares are on display in the windows. He picked it out because it looked odd. His conscience—he had been raised with a very articulate conscience—reluctantly consented to the purchase because the coin was very heavy for its size and might be gold. (It certainly wasn't a medal, and therefore had to be a coin.) It bore an inscription in conventionalized Arabic script on one side, and something on the other that looked like an elaborate throne without anybody sitting on it. But when Tony tried to look it up, there simply wasn't any record in any numismatic catalogue of any coinage even resembling it.

One night—this was his first visit, not the later one when he learned about the fourth dimension—he went down on East Broadway for *shishkebab,* and it occurred to him to ask the Syrian restaurant-keeper what the Arabic inscription might say. The Syrian read it, frowned darkly, and told Tony that the coin was a ten-dirhim piece, that the inscription said it was a coin of Barkutand, that he had never heard of any place called Barkut. Neither had Tony. So Tony got a little curious about it, and the next day spent half an hour in the Fifth Avenue library trying to find out something about either the coin or the country it came from. But as far as the library was concerned, there wasn't any place called Barkut. Never had been.

The coin was solid gold, though. A jeweler verified that. At bullion, it was worth somewhere around six dollars. And since Tony had paid only a dollar and a half for it, he was rather pleased. Even his conscience smugly approved. It isn't often that you pick up anything in an antique shop that you can sell for more than you paid for it, no matter what people tell you. So Tony kept it for a luck-piece, and every night on the way home from the office he paused outside Paddy Scanlon's Bar and Grill and gravely tossed the coin to see

whether he should have a drink or not. Which was a pretty good way of being neither too abstemious nor too regular in such matters. His conscience approved of this, too.

He didn't really think the coin brought him good luck, but the small mystery of it intrigued him. He was a rather ordinary young man, was Tony. He'd enlisted in the Second World War, but had never got beyond a base camp although he'd howled for action. Instead, he sat on his rear and pounded a typewriter for three long years. Then he was discharged and got his old job back—at the same old salary—and went back to his old lodging house—at a bright new rate per week. Kind of a sour deal all around. So now he was glad he had the coin—because he liked to imagine things. His conscience sternly and constantly reminded him that he should be polite, attentive to his duties, efficient and no clock-watcher; and the radio reminded him every morning while he was dressing that he'd better use a specific tooth paste, hair stickum, breath deodorant, and brand of popular-priced suits. It was pleasant, therefore, to have something vague and mysterious around, like the coin.

It couldn't have been made as a novelty or anything like that. Not when it was gold. But it came from no country anyone had ever heard of. He liked to think that there was some mystery about its having reached his hands; some significance in the fact that he had come to own it and no one else. To make it seem more significant, probably, he got into the habit of tossing it for all decisions of no particular moment. Whether to go to a ball game or not. Whether or not to eat at his regular restaurant. On this excess, his conscience dourly reserved decision.

He'd owned the coin two months, and the habit of using it to make small decisions had become fixed, when one evening he tossed it to see whether or not he should go to his regular restaurant for dinner. It came tails. No. He was mildly amused. To another restaurant uptown? Tails again. He flipped and flipped and flipped. His common sense told him that he was simply running into a long sequence of tails. But he liked to think that the decisions of the coin were mysterious and significant. Tonight he got a little excited when one place after another was negatived. He ran out of restaurants he could remember having dined in. So he tossed his coin with the mental note that if it came heads he'd try a new restaurant, where he'd never dined before. But the coin came tails. Negative. Then he really racked his brains—and remembered the little Syrian restaurant down on lower East Broadway. He flipped for that. And the coin came heads.

He got on the subway and rode downtown, while his conscience made scornful comments about superstition. He went into the small converted store with something of an anticipatory thrill. His way of

life was just about as unexciting as anybody's life could be. He had been pretty well tamed by the way he was raised, which had created a conscience with a mind of its own and usually discouraging opinions. His conscience now spoke acidly, and he had to assure it that he didn't really believe that the coin meant anything, but that he only liked to pretend it did.

So he sat down at a table and automatically flipped the coin to see whether he should order *shishkebab* or not. The swarthy, slick-haired proprietor grinned at him. There was a bald-headed man at a table in the back—a man in impeccably tailored clothing, with gold-rimmed eyeglasses and the definite dark dignity of a Levantine of some sort.

"Say," said the proprietor, in wholly colloquial English. "You showed me a funny goldpiece last time you were here. Is it that? Mr. Emurian, back there, he knows a lot about that stuff. A very educated man! You want I should ask him about it?"

This seemed to Tony a mysterious coincidence. He agreed eagerly. The restaurant-keeper took the coin. He showed it to the bald-headed man. They talked at length, not in English. The restaurant-keeper came back.

"He never seen one like it," he reported. "And he never heard of Barkut, where it says it come from. But he says there's a kinda story about coins and things like that—things that come from places that nobody ever heard of. He'll tell you if you want."

"Please!" said Tony. He found his heart beating faster. "If he'll join me—"

"Oh, he'll have a cuppa coffee, maybe," said the restaurant-keeper. "On the house. He's a very educated man, Mr. Emurian is."

He went back. The bald-headed man rose and came with easy dignity toward Tony's table. His eyes twinkled. Tony was flustered because this Mr. Emurian looked so foreign and spoke such perfect English and was so perfectly at ease.

"There is a legend," he told Tony humorously, "which might amuse you—if I may put down my coffee cup? Thank you." He sat. "It is an old wives' tale, and yet it fits oddly into the theories of Mr. Einstein and other learned men. But I know a man in Ispahan who would give you a great sum for that coin because of the legend. Would you wish to sell?"

Tony shook his head.

"Say—five hundred dollars?" asked Mr. Emurian, smiling behind his eyeglasses. "No? Not even a thousand? I will give you the address of the man who would buy it, if you ever wish to sell."

Tony was too flabbergasted to even shake his head.

Mr. Emurian laughed. "This man," he explained amiably, "would

say that the coin comes from a country which is not upon our maps because it is unapproachable by any ordinary means. Yet it is wholly real and actually has a certain commerce with us. It is—hm—have you ever heard of worlds supposed to be like ours, but in other—ah—dimensions, say, or in parallel but not identical times?"

"I've read Wells' *Time Machine,"* said Tony awkwardly.

"Not at all the same," the dark man assured him. "And notions of startling new machines for traveling between sets of dimensions or in time itself are quite absurd. Discoveries of that sort are never drastic! When electricity was discovered, it was your own Franklin who observed that it was no new force, but quite commonplace. Every thunderstorm since time began had demonstrated it. Similarly, if travel between worlds or to other times should ever become really practical, it is certain that the discovery will not be dramatic. It will turn out that people have been doing it for centuries as a matter of course, without ever realizing it."

"You mean—" Tony stopped.

"The legend," said Mr. Emurian, "suggests that your coin came from a world not our own. That it came from a world where history quite truthfully denies much of the history we truthfully teach to children." He regarded Tony zestfully and said, "Ordinarily, two things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. But two places which are exactly equal to each other are identical—are the same place. Now consider! Suppose that somewhere there existed a world in which Aladdin's lamp existed and was in good working order. Suppose that upon that world there was a place which was absolutely identical with a place in this world. It would have to be a place where the working or not working of Aladdin's lamp made absolutely no difference. Now, according to the legend, those two places, on two worlds, would actually be one place which was on both worlds, and which would serve as a perfectly practical gateway between them. Travelers would pass casually through it without ever noticing it. You and I perhaps, pass through such gateways every day without the least realization."

The dark man seemed to find amused satisfaction in the look of mystified enthusiasm on Tony's face. He waved a manicured hand.

"Look at this restaurant. Here. Tonight," he said, beaming. "Today, for example, Calcutta could have vanished in a tidal wave and be sunk forever under the sea. Or it could not. Here and now, we knowing nothing about it, such an event would still have made no slightest difference. So that from this restaurant tonight we could walk out into two different worlds—you into the one where such an event had taken place, and I into the world where it did not. And I might go and live peacefully and die of old age in the Calcutta which to you

was utterly destroyed."

"But we are in the same world!" protested Tony. "We'll stay in the same world!"

"Probably, but are you sure?" Mr. Emurian twinkled through his glasses. "We have never seen each other before. How do you know that I have always lived in this particular world? How do you know that the history of the world in which I was born is the same? I was surely not taught the same history! And if we separate here tonight, and you never see or hear of me again, how will you know that I remain in the world you inhabit?"

Tony said painfully, but with his heart beating fast:

"I—guess I won't. But there's no proof, either, that—"

"We agree," said Mr. Emurian, nodding. "There can be no proof. I have told you a legend. It says that there are other worlds. They are not quite real to us, because we cannot reach them at will. But according to legend they touch each other at many places, and it is possible to travel from one to another, and in fact we constantly visit the frontier cities of other worlds without ever knowing it. We do not know it, because we are a part of our own world, and there is an attraction; a magnetism; a gravitation, perhaps; which draws us back before we stray far through the gateway of a world which is not our own."

He regarded Tony benevolently through his eyeglasses.

"As for your coin—sometimes that gravitation or that attraction is not enough. We stray deep into other worlds and doubtless we are very unhappy. Or an object from another world strays into ours. But always the gravitation or the magnetism remains to some degree. That is what my friend in Ispahan believes—so firmly that he might be willing to pay you as much as two thousand dollars for the coin in your hand."

Tony looked at the coin with deep respect. He had never in all his life before owned anything worth even a fraction of two thousand dollars. His conscience spoke in no uncertain terms. He said slowly:

"I—suppose I ought to sell it, then. I can't really afford to carry around a luck-piece as valuable as that. I—might lose it." After a moment, he said wistfully: "I suppose your friend is a coin collector?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Emurian. "He is a businessman. He would use the coin, I am sure, to get into this other world and set up a branch of his business there. He would import Barkutian dates or dried figs or rugs, or possibly gold and frankincense and myrrh. He might deal in ivory and apes and peacocks in exchange for Birmingham cutlery, printed cotton cloth, and kerosene lamps. And if the atmosphere were congenial he might establish a residence there, staffed with pretty slave girls and Mameluke guards, and settle down

to a life of comfortable luxury with no fear of atomic bombs and Communism."

Tony said more wistfully still:

"How would the coin guide him to Barkut?"

Mr. Emurian gently shook an admonitory finger.

"You accept my legend as fact, my dear sir! You are a romantic!" Then he added comfortably: "I do not know how he would use the coin as a guide. I do know that he would consider that it was not quite real in this world, and hence should be exempt from some physical laws. He would expect it to have some tendency to become more real, which it could only do by returning to its own time and place. How the tendency would show itself, I cannot guess. But I will write down my friend's name and address. I promise that he will pay you a high price for your token."

Tony Gregg looked almost hungrily at the coin. An idea came into his head. His conscience, its eyes on that two thousand, protested indignantly.

"I'll let the coin decide," he said unhappily. "Heads I sell it, tails I don't."

He tossed. The coin thumped on the table. Tails. He gulped in relief and pushed back his chair.

"It's settled," he said, flushing a little in his excitement. "And—and I won't take your friend's address because I—don't want to be able to change my mind."

Mr. Emurian beamed.

"A romantic!" he said approvingly. "It is admirable! I wish you good fortune, sir!"

Tony thanked him confusedly and paid his bill and departed.

Outside, in the spottily lighted street, he felt more or less dazed; his conscience prodded him, bitingly reproachful, demanding that he go back and get the address he had just refused. This was in the Syrian quarter, on lower East Broadway, with signs in Arabic in those scattered shop windows still lighted. Most of the buildings about were dark and silent, and there were only very occasional lumbering trucks for traffic. The atmosphere was a compound of the exotic and the commonplace that did not make for clear thinking. The facts were staggering, too. If the coin in Tony's pocket was worth two thousand dollars, that in itself was enough to make him dizzy. He had never carried more than a week's salary in his pocket at any time, and never that for long.

So he rode uptown on a subway train which had come from Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, and would go uptown only to Times Square. At Times Square he changed trains like a sleepwalker and went further uptown still. He was lost in excited, dazzled speculation

which hardly let him notice his surroundings. He had come up from the subway exit and was walking toward his lodging when he realized he'd been too agitated to eat the *shishkebab* he'd paid for. He came to a diner, and was still hungry. He automatically flipped the coin. It came heads. He went into the diner. The man at the stool next to him got up and went out. He left a paper that he'd stuck under him when he finished with it. Tony thriftily retrieved it while waiting for his hamburger and coffee. Then a thrill went all the way down his backbone and he nearly choked. The paper was *Racing Form.*

On the way uptown Tony'd had a bitter argument with his infuriated conscience. He'd insisted defensively that if an importer of dates and dried figs and rugs in Ispahan could find profit in a journey to Barkut, why couldn't an up-and-coming young American do even better? Tony was no businessman, but he'd been trained to believe that anybody who did not desire above all things to be a brisk young executive had something wrong with him. So he'd been insisting feverishly that commerce in electric refrigerators, nylon stockings, fertilizer, lipstick and bubble gum was his life's ambition, and this was his chance. But actually, his mind had kept slipping off sidewise to visions of white-walled cities under a blazing sun, and of lustrous-eyed slave girls and Mamelukes armed with scimitars, and of camel caravans winding over desert wastes.

It was in a hopeless confusion of such images that he left the diner and went to his room, clutching *Racing Form* fast. He sat up till long past midnight, flipping the coin and charting out a crucial test of its virtues. He dreamed chaotically all night, and when morning came he awoke with common sense—i.e., his conscience—reviling him bitterly for his plans.

But he would not be shamed out of them. His conscience grew strident and then almost hysterical, but he sneaked out of the house with a hangdog air as if to avoid his own eyes, and rode to Belmont Racetrack with his hat pulled down over his forehead. When he put down the first two dollars at the betting window his conscience had been reduced to the point of simply jeering at him for a fool and a romantic, refusing a chance to sell a crazy luck-piece for two thousand dollars so he could use it to guide him in making two-dollar bets! A horse named Rainy Sunday? said his conscience derisively. Tomorrow would be Black Friday when he was fired for taking an unauthorized day off!

But Rainy Sunday won, paying six for two. Then Occiput paid off. Then, in order, Slipstream, and Miss Inflation, and Quiz Kid, and Armageddon… and the daily double…

Tony rode back to town in a sort of stunned composure. He had a trifle—a few hundred—more than eleven thousand dollars in his

pocket. His conscience told him with icy disapproval that it had all been coincidence, and that now the proper thing for him to do was put that eleven thousand dollars in good, conservative securities, and never go near a race track again.

So Tony went up to his room and packed in feverish haste while his conscience yammered at him in mounting agitation, paid his rooming-house bill, and went out and flagged a taxi while the mood of resolution—and escape—was upon him. In the taxi he flipped the coin to see where he should head in order to take the coin nearer to Barkut. If there was a mysterious attraction trying to pull the coin back to its own world, it would obviously work on probability, operating to cause coincidences that would take it home. And if somebody was letting it guide him by flipping it for heads and tails…

Well, there was eleven thousand dollars to make the theory seem likely.

A couple of weeks later Tony considered the theory proved. At that time he had reached, he was fairly sure, a place well off any imaginable map of the world he had been born in. He stood on a sandy beach with blue sea to his left and desert on all other sides. A middle-sized whirlwind or sand-devil spun meditatively in one place a quarter-mile away, seeming to watch.

Tony had one desert Arab, very much unwashed, squirming under his right foot, and two other equally unwashed scoundrels coming furiously at him with spears from right and left. At this moment he thought irrelevantly, but not at all regretfully, of the tossings of the coin that had begun his journey.

He did not have time for philosophizing, however. So he swung the long, curved scimitar in his hand, pulled his belted-in-the-back topcoat out of the way with his left hand, and faced his would-be assassins.

Chapter 2

It could have been a very happy journey—up to the unwashed scoundrels, at least—but Tony's conscience had tried to spoil everything. It spoke with an inflection very much like the maiden aunt who'd raised him. Tony would get into trouble, said his conscience gloomily, for slipping off without a passport, and actually bribing somebody to help him do it. He should have paid the income tax on that eleven thousand dollars and put the rest in gilt-edged bonds. He should not have flown across the South Atlantic in a plane of such antiquity, to a flying field in Tunisia instead of to a proper airport where he would have been arrested for not having proper papers. He should not have slugged the Tunisian customs official who was planning to arrest him anyhow, even though the coin had blithely come heads when tossed for the decision. And certainly, having done so, he should not have tucked a hundred-dollar bill in officialdom's fingers for the man to find when he came to. To be sure, the official had pocketed the bill and kept his mouth shut, but fifty would have been enough. After all, where was more money coming from when this was gone, and what was Tony gaining in exchange for wasted cash?

So said Tony's conscience, which was a born killjoy. He ignored it as much as he could. It was exhilarating to dodge regulations and red tape after a lifetime subject to them. His conscience said aggrievedly that he was now a felon and would presently be confined in a jail with primitive sanitary arrangements. Tony's maiden aunt, who had formed his conscience, had been hell on sanitation.

But Tony paid no heed. He spent money lavishly and got in return things which he prized highly. A sight of the sun setting on the desert. Once a bare glimpse of a dusky Arab damsel's face when the wind blew aside her veil. The smell of horses and camels and the East generally—concentrated it was bad, but when sufficiently diluted it was delectable—and that gorgeous time near the end of his journeying when a skinny thief tried to rob him in the bazaar at Suakim on the Red Sea and Tony grandly rescued him from the blows of indignant merchants who had meant to rob Tony in another manner. Afterward, too, he'd hired the thief to be his guide and interpreter. The coin came heads when he tossed it for the decision.

These things gave him satisfactions not to be obtained from the actions approved by common sense and the code of conduct a right-thinking young future executive should abide by. Tony thrived on them. He put on weight. He grew sunburned. Contentedly going where the toss of a coin suggested, knowing nothing of what the next

instant would bring except that it would be unexpected, he straightened up from what had been an incipient bookkeeper's stoop. He walked with a freer motion and looked—this was the odd part—a much more likely prospect for a young executive's job than he had ever looked before.

His conscience grudgingly conceded as much, but waxed ever more bitter as Tony spent his funds lavishly for progress toward whatever unknown destination the supposedly homing coin would lead him to. Curiously, the coin did come an almost mathematically exact even number of heads and tails over a reasonable period of time. The laws of chance were not broken by an excess of heads, or tails, or excessively long runs of either. There could be absolutely no guarantee that Tony's travels were guided by anything but purest arbitrary chance. But his journeying was convincingly direct, when he plotted it on a map. He'd come as straight as transportation facilities would allow to Suakim on the Red Sea.

Suakim is and always will be a hot and sleepy and odorous town full of Arabs, Tamils, Somalis, and other persons who regard non-Moslems—their official rulers included—as the destined and legitimate prey of the Faithful. Tony's newly hired interpreter considered Tony his express and particular prey. For a time he tried valiantly to collect by wheedling Tony to make purchases on which he—the interpreter—would collect commissions of from fifty to seventy-five percent. For one long night he waited hopefully for Tony to snore, so that he could rob his baggage. But Tony slept dreamlessly and silently, like a child.

Then the interpreter's opportunity came.

On the third day of Tony's stay in Suakim—the coin came invariably tails at any suggestion of departure—Tony made some small purchase in the bazaar. He gave an Egyptian pound in payment. In the change there was a small silver coin with an inscription in conventionalized Arabic script on one side, and an ornate, empty throne on the other. Tony regarded it with apparent calm. He showed it to his hired thief.

"This is a coin of Barkut," he told the man who was itching to rob him. "It is my desire to go to Barkut. Arrange it."

He went back to the fly-infested hotel, where he paid nine prices for his lodging. He spent some time flipping the coin. He had changed a good deal inside as well as out, once he'd learned how to grow really stern with his conscience. The coin turned up some heads and some tails. If it actually had a homing instinct, it gave him essential information. If everything had been a matter of chance up to now, and the series of coincidences between fact and the heads-and-tails decisions of the coin were about to end, it simply led him to

preparations for an over-elaborate suicide.

Within the hour, his interpreter came back to the hotel with voluble assurances that he had engaged a *bakhil* to carry Tony to Barkut. It was taking on the last of its cargo now. It would put out into the harbor at sunset, and Tony must board it secretly during the night because of harbor regulations.

Tony packed. He was reasonably well outfitted, now. He dressed for his journey in the absolute ultimate of the inappropriate. He wore a soft felt hat, brightly polished brown shoes, and a camel's-hair topcoat with a belt in the back. He slipped a revolver in his pocket.

Night fell. Tony dined, as well as the resources of Suakim would permit, and felt expansive and contented and anticipative. Two hours after dark, his interpreter returned with news that the *bakhil* was out in the harbor and awaited his coming. Tony went down to the water front of Suakim—a not too cautious move in itself, alone and at night. He climbed down a ladder into a small boat and placidly let himself be rowed out into the darkness. The night was black, save that stars glowed enormously against a sky like velvet. The sleepy, murmurous sounds of the city were very romantic indeed. There was the lapping of waves, and somewhere a wraith of string music where revelers made merry, and somewhere a dog barked indignantly in the darkness. That was all, except the sound of the oars.

Presently a dark form loomed ahead. The *bakhil* was an ungainly shape some seventy or eighty feet long, with the stubby thick mast and colossal boom on her lateen rig. Tony's interpreter hailed. A guttural voice replied. The small boat came alongside the *bakhil* and the interpreter steadied it for Tony to step on board. He climbed to the deck. The *bakhil* stank glamorously of fish and pearl oysters and goat hides and kerosene and tar and bilge water and humanity. Its deck was an impenetrable maze of shadows in the starlight. Tony drew a deep breath of complete satisfaction. He moved aside to be out of the way.

Then there was an infuriated howl, plus the sound of oars being worked at most enthusiastic speed. Tony's interpreter and guide had obsequiously held the small boat to allow him to board the *bakhil.* The unwashed cutthroats of its crew had prepared to receive Tony's baggage. Instead, they saw and heard the shore boat being rowed away at the topmost speed of which the interpreter was capable.

The *bakhil's* crew howled with rage, which was not righteous indignation at the witnessing of a theft, but the much greater rage of being cheated of the privilege of stealing Tony's possessions for themselves. Men raved up and down the deck, uttering deep-throated maledictions at the top of their voices. Then, forward, the loudest voice shouted down the others. A small boat from the *bakhil* splashed

overside. It went cursing after the racing oar strokes of the boat with Tony's baggage in it.

Tony stepped delicately to the stern and ensconced himself against the rail. He got a cigarette lighter and lighted a cigarette and smoked it happily, still holding the lighter in his hand. This event had been implied in the series of heads and tails the golden coin of Barkut had turned up when he spun it for decisions on how he should prepare for the trip by sea. All this uproar was consoling confirmation of the homing tendency of the ten-dirhim piece. He smoked beatifically, while out on the dark harbor water one small boat manned by cutthroats went raging after another small boat manned by a sneak thief, and the crew of the *bakhil* listened between cursings to the sounds on the water.

Far off, there was a howl of fury. Still farther, a triumphant yell of derision. The small boat of the *bakhil* came back in a thick fog of sulphurous language, Tony's late interpreter evidently having made the shore and gotten away with his loot.

The boat's crew scrambled to the deck. The boat itself was made fast overside. There was much muttered talk. Then men came astern to where Tony smoked in blissful excitement. They circled him deliberately. He snapped his cigarette lighter. Its glow showed him the villainous bearded faces of the *bakhil's* crew. Hairy chests and ragged garments. Knives gleaming and ready.

And the lighter's flame showed them Tony, puffing joyously on a cigarette, with one hand holding the lighter with its flickering flame, and the other holding a cocked revolver.

There was a pause without words.

Then a launch's internal combustion engine caught somewhere. It began to run with a sort of purring roar. A harbor launch. A police launch, probably, ready to investigate the howls of fury on the harbor's dark waters. If Tony were murdered here and now, his body might have to be slid overboard still unrobbed, and even that would be dangerous. More, he might kill somebody first.

The sound of the police-launch motor moved across the harbor. A voice grunted urgently on the *bakhil*'s deck, and the group before Tony melted. Men swarmed to ropes and spars. The great lateen sail rose creaking against the sky, and forward, men hauled feverishly at a crude windlass to lift the *bakhil*'s anchor. Then slowly, slowly, slowly, in what were hardly catspaws of wind off the land, the *bakhil* gathered way.

It moved creakingly but very smoothly over the water. When the police launch was at its nearest, Tony tossed his cigarette overboard and blandly watched it go by. He was contentedly confident that all went well.

But his conscience wailed, as the police launch departed. Now he would be killed, and there would be nobody in all the world who would ever admit to the least idea of his fate. He could be traced—perhaps!—to Suakim, though even that was unlikely. But from Suakim on he would seem to have evaporated. With dawn, the *bakhil* would be remote from all witnesses to happenings on its deck. Tony would be murdered and robbed, and his few remaining possessions divided among these cutthroats who had surely no intention of taking him to any agreed-on destination! And what good had he done, or even tried to do? Even if he unthinkably escaped murder, now, he had not even pretended to make inquiries in Suakim on the probable products of Barkut, of the market it might offer for imports, or even of the possible profit in import-export trade! He had thrown away his life, and more—here Tony's conscience grew acrimonious—he had not made one single move that a brisk young executive would have made first of all!

Chapter 3

The *bakhil* cleared the harbor. The wind freshened, and she bent to the breeze and her forefoot cut into the swells. Tony smoked contentedly. He reflected that something like this untraceability was necessary for a journey to Barkut and other places not on topographic surveys. If the area about a gateway were ever searched for a person who had gone through it, that very search would change it, so that somehow it would cease to be identical in the two worlds, and so would cease to be a gateway. In ancient days, when news traveled slowly and searches for missing persons were unthought of, there must have been many gateways indeed. That would account for the wild fables which none believed, nowadays, but which were probably history in some world or other. There was probably a brisk trade between places where magic lamps were functional devices, and prosaic places like the world of Tony's youth. Now gateways were probably rare and trade almost nonexistent. But not quite. He had the proof of that!

So Tony grinned happily to himself in the starlight at the *bakhil*'s stern. He let his imagination run riot in pictures of white-walled cities under a brazen sky, and camel caravans in slow motion over fabled sands, and—to be honest about it—he meditated with some interest upon the possibility of lustrous-eyed slave girls whose sense of duty to their master might make them very interesting companions—if one happened to be their master.

When the sun rose he was still thinking about the sort of residence a successful young executive might set up in Barkut if that land were as uninhabited as the bald-headed man had suggested in the *shishkebab* restaurant. But about him there was no sign of any sort of civilization. The *bakhil* glided smoothly over waves that were neither high nor negligible. The sea was of an improbable but fascinating color. The sky was lapis lazuli, and the *bakhil* was sheer archaic clumsiness. The heavy, bending boom which carried her mainsail seemed about to crack with the burden of patched canvas and wind which strained it. The crew was as unsavory a gang of cutthroats as ever a director sought in vain for a motion picture. There was not a man who did not carry a knife in plain view, and few who had not been liberally scarred by the knives of others. The captain's face looked very like a rough sketch for a crossword puzzle blank.

None spoke a word to Tony. All glowered when he met their eyes. The *bakhil* sailed on a course Tony could not determine, toward a destination he could not guess—except that it surely was not Barkut—and there was apparently no soul on board but himself who spoke

English or had any feeling but that of murderous antipathy toward him.

He flipped the golden ten-dirhim piece and felt exceeding peace fill all his being. Crew members saw the glint of gold in the sunshine. If Tony moved from the rail and one of them could get behind him, the result would be final. If he dozed, he would wake in another world, but not very likely Barkut. His life hung upon the fact that he had a revolver, and that it might cost lives to kill him. He waited contentedly all through the baking-hot day for nightfall, quite well aware that with the darkness plans would take effect to abate the nuisance of his living presence.

Came the sunset. Glorious reds and golds. The surface of the sea looked like molten aureate metal. The whiskered villains of the *bakhil*'s crew prostrated themselves in pious prayer unto Allah, and then began low-toned discussions over the most practical way of inserting some six or seven inches of steel into Tony's liver.

He beamed. He was alive. This was life and zest and adventure such as he had never known or dreamed of before. His conscience was despairingly silent. Tony would not have changed places with anyone on earth.

* * *

The sun sank below the horizon. Darkness seemed to flow over the world from the horizon on every hand. Obscurity blotted out the edge of the world, and shadows appeared and grew opaque upon the *bakhil*'s deck, and Suhail, the great star, shone brightly in a dimming sky. Then it was night.

Men gathered forward. And Tony tossed overboard his twentieth cigarette of the day, and heard it hiss briefly as it touched the water. He moved briskly, silently.

The helmsman closed his eyes and sank to the deck. Darkness hid his sorrow. He had been the victim of a scientific gun-whipping learned by Tony in a neighborhood movie palace on Amsterdam Avenue, while watching Randolph Scott in the role of a frontier marshal. Tony re-pocketed the revolver, hauled the trailing small boat close under the *bakhil*'s stern; then he pushed the great tiller hard over. The lubberly *bakhil* came heavily up into the wind and hung there. Its lateen sail flapped crazily. The ship careened, the massive boom swung over and increased its heel, and then the *bakhil* seemed simply to shiver irresolutely, dead in the water, all way gone.

Tony slipped over the stern into the small boat. He took to the oars as a displeased outcry arose on deck. He pulled off into the darkness. He had no idea where he might be, save that he was roughly twenty hours slow sail from Suakim. He might be anywhere along the African eastern coast, or along either of two shores of Arabia. The essential thing was to get away from the *bakhil* where his murder was at the moment being loudly promised.

He got away. When some sort of order seemed to be restored on the ship, he ceased his rowing and muffled his oars. Then he went back to work, pulling sturdily up-wind. The *bakhil* had somewhat less than the sailing properties of an ordinary washtub. Pulling upwind from her, he might progress faster to windward by manpower than she could by sail. Certainly, once he was lost in the darkness she would never find him again.

She did not. After half an hour, Tony Gregg—clad in soft felt hat, highly polished brown shoes, and a camel's-hair topcoat belted in the back—curled himself up on the bottom-boards of the little boat and went contentedly to sleep. His last conscious thought was a mild wonderment that even this landing-boat had a pervading aroma of fish, pearl oysters, goat hides, bilge water, kerosene, and the unwashed humanity that occupied it recently.

Bumpings awakened him. The boat's keel thumped on a sandy bottom. He opened his eyes and saw a colossal, amiably stupid face gazing open-mouthed down at him. He knew immediately that it was an illusion, because it was five feet from ear to ear and definitely on the misty side—a countenance formed in vapor. He closed his eyes resolutely and told himself to wake up. When he opened them again there was naturally nothing in sight but very blue, very clear sky above the gunwale. But the boat bumped again. Tony sat up and saw a sandy shore and a sandy beach and a sandy stretch of pure barrenness beyond. There was no surf. Fairly gentle waves bumped the small boat, and bumped it again, and gradually edged it toward the strand on which the swells broke in half-hearted foaming.

There was just one really curious feature about the world he saw. That oddity was a minor, dark-colored whirlwind—actually a sand devil—which wavered its way along the beach a hundred yards away. It looked—the thought was fanciful—rather like the picture of a *djinn* coming out of a bottle that had been in a copy of the *Arabian Nights* Tony had owned as a small boy. He noted the resemblance, but of course thought no more of it. For one thing, there was no bottle. For another, this small whirlwind traveled in a wholly natural fashion. It went a couple of hundred yards further and then seemed to stop, spinning in a meditative fashion.

* * *

Tony sat at ease until the boat finally grounded. Then he seized the moment of a receding wave to step overside and walk smartly ashore without wetting more than the soles of his low-cut shoes. Safely on land, he was—and almost infinitely alone. There was sea on the one hand, and sand on the other. That was all. There was not even a sea bird flapping over the waves. Only the whirling sand devil remained to break stillness. It was rather peculiar that it was so dark, when whirling above such white sand. It looked rather like smoke.

He flipped the ten-dirhim piece. He marched valiantly along the shore in obedience to its decision. He covered half a mile. The whirlwind persisted. It moved inland. It grew taller, as if to keep him in view. Odd…

Then three men on camels came over the crest of a sand dune and halted, regarding him. He waved to them. They came toward him, shading their eyes to search for possible companions beyond and behind him. But he was patently alone. They gobbled in low tones at one another.

They came closer and dismounted and regarded him, with cat-in-canary-cage smiles. They were whiskered, they were dirty, and they were almost certainly verminous. One, short and fat, fingered a scimitar suggestively. The other two carried spears. The small whirlwind moved restlessly, half a mile away. The three men ignored it.

Tony flipped the ten-dirhim piece. It glittered goldenly in the sunshine. The expressions of the trio changed from merely ominous greed to resolution. The short man with the scimitar swaggered up to Tony. The two others watched with glittering eyes. The short man said something that probably meant “Gimme!” Tony flipped the ten-dirhim piece. The man with the scimitar scowled and grabbed. Tony swung. Hard, to the whiskers. He felt a certain naive pride when the whiskered man went flat on his back, wheezing in astonishment. He snatched up the scimitar and said sternly to the others:

“I’m on my way to Barkut. But I’ll be glad to pay you—”

The other two men came for him at a run. They had very practical spears, which they carried in an accustomed manner. They made for him from two sides, one from the right and one from the left. A scimitar is not a weapon for use against spear. Moreover, Tony found it necessary to keep his foot on the wriggling, wheezing fat man to keep him still. These were desert Arabs—Bedouin—to whom the possession of goods is a sign of luck but by no means of inviolate personal ownership. If somebody has something they want and they

can with reasonable safety take it, they do so, rejoicing.

Tony learned this fact later. At the moment he was only aware that they meant definitely to kill him for the ten-dirhim piece whose glint in the sunshine had roused their cupidity. They were remote from all law or other reasons for restraint. The spearmen plunged for him, eyes intent. Tony thought, in one masterpiece of irrelevant reflection, of the moment when he had begun this journey by flipping a coin. But still he would not have changed places with anybody in the world.

He took action. It was pure instinct. The scimitar in his hand had a good deal of the feel of a slightly heavy tennis racquet. It even balanced like a racquet. The left-hand spearman was nearest.

Tony swung the scimitar as for a neat back-hand return-volley stroke. The head of the spear sprang off. Quickly he turned and with the scimitar served a fast though imaginary ball straight over the net. He followed through. The second spearman got in the way. Tony still followed through. He saw his victim with unforgettable clarity—pure, bearded villainy with one eye and a sword-split nose. Then the scimitar landed. The result was colorful—mostly red—and unquestionably lethal. Tony wanted to be sick, and to avoid it he turned on his two remaining foes. The short fat man was on his feet now, still wheezing. The spearman looked dazed. They ran. Tony chased them with his reddened scimitar. They headed at first straight for the whirlwind, but then swerved around it, almost warily; just as it obligingly started to get out of their way. They vanished over sand hills.

Tony stopped, panting. He went back to the scene of the conflict. He carefully did not look at the man he'd hit with the scimitar. There were three camels, still kneeling. Tony wanted to get away from there. He tethered two of them to the third, and mounted that one. Nothing happened. He kicked it.

The camel, offensively chewing a reeking cud, got up hind-end first, and Tony nearly fell off. Then it resignedly began to move in some indefinite direction. The other two camels followed docilely. The whirlwind moved companionably along with them—never very near, but never quite out of sight. At times it was a mile away and of respectable size. Sometimes it was only a couple of hundred yards off, and not more than twenty or thirty feet high. But it followed persistently, rather like an interested stray dog following a man whose smell fascinates it.

Hours later—many hours later—a white-walled city appeared in the distance. Date groves surrounded it. There were minarets within the wall, and a lacy structure comparable for beauty of design to the Taj Mahal—only the Taj Mahal is a tomb. A camel caravan moved

unhurriedly away from its gates, bound for some place of mystery on beyond.

The whirlwind fell behind, as if bashful. It stretched upward and upward—again as if to keep Tony in sight—until it was merely the most tenuous of mistinesses. That was when he was almost at the edge of the oasis. Then it vanished suddenly, as if it had collapsed.

Tony Gregg rode up to the nearest city gate and slid down his camel's off foreleg, which stank. Soldiers in turbans and slippers and carrying flintlock muskets looked at him in lively suspicion. He essayed to speak. They essayed to speak. Then they all stared. Presently two of them took him gingerly by the arm and led him through the city streets.

The smells and sights and sounds he encountered were those of a dream city—though the smells were not altogether those of a pretty dream. There were flat-topped houses and veiled women and proud camels and bearded men. There were barred, narrow windows and metal-studded doors, and projecting upper stories to the houses which leaned out above the narrow streets and nearly blotted out the sky.

The two soldiers led Tony, thrilled and satisfied, into a dark doorway. They released him. They stepped back. There was a conclusive *clang.* And Tony saw that the doorway was completely filled by a grille of very solid and very heavy grim iron bars, through which he and the soldiers blinked at each other. He was in a prison. He was in a partially open-air dungeon. He was, in fact, in the clink.

This was the manner of his arrival in Barkut.

Chapter 4

Three weeks later, in mid-morning, Tony sat comfortably in the shady part of the courtyard and looked more or less dreamily at the slave girl Ghail's legs. She had nice legs, and rather a lot of them was on display. They were slim, as a girl's legs ought to be, and they tapered nicely to the knee, and then they flared just the right amount at just the right place below them, and went down to very nice ankles, and below them to small bare feet—very dusty at the moment—one of which tapped ominously on the floor of the courtyard. He was still kept behind a locked iron grate, technically imprisoned, and his conscience had had a swell time pointing out to him how completely irresponsible and harebrained and half-witted all his actions had been. He was, however, unworried except over the reaction that tapping foot might presage.

At first, of course, he'd been totally unable to speak Arabic, and nobody in Barkut seemed to be able to speak English. He'd tried to communicate from his original prison cell with the help of a dog-eared guide book he'd picked up second-hand in Suez. The vocabulary it offered, however, was limited. It gave the phrases for complaining that prices were too high, that the food was overripe, and that the speaker wanted to go back to his hotel. But in Barkut Tony had been charged nothing, the food was good if monotonous—though fresh ripe dates had been a revelation to him—and he was in jail and had no hotel. After two days of this unsatisfactory conversation, he'd been moved to a convenient cell-and-courtyard in the palace. He'd been inspected by various whiskered people he thought were officials, and then the slave girl Ghail had appeared and resolutely set to work to teach him to talk.

That was the way she undoubtedly looked at it. Tony was presumably an adult male, but he babbled only a few Arabic words, and those with a vile accent. The slave girl had settled down to the job with something like a scowl. She had an imperial carriage, which Tony recalled vaguely could be credited to the carriage of burdens on her head as a child. She was long-legged and lissome and had an air of firm competence, and he knew she was a slave girl because married women and the marriageable daughters of citizens walked the streets —if at all—only when swathed in voluminous robes and with veils which complied with the strictest of Moslem traditions. This girl Ghail was not swathed to speak of, and she was not veiled at all, and she was distinctly pretty and very far from shapeless. And she regarded Tony with a scowling disparagement which made him work earnestly to learn to carry on a conversation.

Matters had progressed nicely in three weeks, and Tony found himself possessed of a talent for languages. But now she tapped her foot ominously on the floor of his comfortable prison. She said, in measured calm:

"Now, just what do you mean by that?"

Tony spoke apologetically. But he was pleased with the fluency he displayed in the Arabic she had taught him.

"I wanted to know."

"And just why did you want to know the name of my owner and the value in money that is placed upon me?" demanded the girl.

"Sooner or later," explained Tony, trying hard to be convincing, "I shall be questioned by the rulers of this place. I think that is why you have been set to teach me the language. When I am questioned and can explain myself, I shall become high in favor, and rich. It was my thought that then—Allah permitting—I would purchase you from your owner."

The slave girl's foot tapped more forbiddingly still.

"And for what purpose," she demanded icily, "would you wish to purchase me?"

Tony looked at her in pained astonishment. His conscience mentioned acidly that this conversation was not only improper but indiscreet. A brisk young executive would never… To which Tony replied that he wouldn't have much fun, then. When his conscience began a heated rejoinder, he cut it short.

"Truly," said Tony in false piety, "somebody has undoubtedly said that the desires of a man's heart are many, but that if there is not one woman more desirable than all else, he is not human."

His Arabic was still sketchy, but he put it over. The girl's eyes, however, instead of warming, burned angrily. "You are human?" she demanded.

"All too human," admitted Tony, "what else?"

She stood up in queenly indignation. She smiled—but painfully and with contempt, like someone speaking to a half-wit or worse.

"You came across the desert from the sea," she said tolerantly, "riding one camel and leading two others. But an hour before your coming, one of the watchers on the city wall had seen a *djinn* in the desert. When you came, so stupid that you could not even speak the language of humans, do you think we did not know you for what you are—a *djinn?"*

"A *djinn*," said Tony blankly. The word was one of the very few—alcohol was another—which would be the same in Arabic and English. "Do you mean those creatures of the Thousand and One Nights?"

"Of history, yes." Ghail's tone was bitingly scornful. "And if we had doubted, within the hour there came a Bedouin to the city gate, a

one-eyed man with a sword-slit nose, who told us of your taking the form of a bale of rich silk, torn open upon the beach of the sea. When he and his companions alighted from their camels to gather up the wealth, you changed instantly to the likeness of a young man strangely garbed and ran swiftly to their camels and flogged them away faster than the men could follow. The man demanded his camels, and they were those you brought to the gates of the city. So they were yielded to him. Do you deny now that you are of the *djinn?"*

Tony swallowed, hard. A one-eyed man with sword-slit nose? That was the man he had killed, back at the seashore! He'd been trying hard to forget the encounter, though if he'd ever had to pick out anybody on looks alone to be worked over with a scimitar, that man would have been the one. But—he could not have come and demanded the camels! It was not possible! Tony had left him an exceedingly messy object on the sand, and had chased his two companions with the scimitar as much in horror of his first dead man as out of any sort of anger. He swallowed again, very pale.

"You could not speak our human language." Ghail was tolerant, and scornful, and amused. "So I taught it to you. We hoped to make a bargain with you, because some of you *djinn* are willing to be traitors to your race. Perhaps you are ready to make such a bargain. But it is insolence for one of the *djinn* to think of purchasing a human slave!"

Even Tony's conscience was stunned, now.

"L-look!" he said desperately. "In my world, *djinns* are only fables! What do they look like?"

"When the watcher on the city wall saw you on the desert, you had the form of a whirlwind. Why not? Is not that the way in which you travel?"

Tony swallowed yet again. His conscience had made a quick recovery. Now it began to say something piously satisfied about now look what a jam he'd gotten himself to, actually thinking romantic thoughts about an idiot girl who believed in imaginary creatures like *djinns* and *efreets!* But Tony shut it up. He saw implications of the theory of multiple worlds that he hadn't realized before. What is true in one world is not necessarily true in another. What is false in one world, also, is not invariably false in another. Actually, if there are enough worlds, anything must be true somewhere. Anything!

And he remembered—and flinched at remembering—his impression of a huge, vaporous, open-mouthed face which had been looking down at him in the small boat when he waked on the shore. He remembered the sand devil, the whirlwind, which had looked like dark smoke in spite of the fact that it was whirling over white sand. It had kept pace with him as he went to meet the Bedouin and their attempt to kill him. It had hovered interestedly near during that

encounter. And it had wavered hopefully after him all the way across the desert to this city.

He gulped audibly. The inference was crazy—but if this was a world in which *djinns* were real, then craziness was sense. And then something else occurred to him.

"How long after my arrival did the one-eyed man come to claim the camels?" he demanded.

The slave girl shrugged. "One hour. No more. That was why we were sure."

"And the camels were stolen by the seashore."

"You stole them! They were stolen by the sea."

"I traveled some hours by camel," said Tony grimly. "He must have followed their footprints in the sand—if he knew where to demand them. So he traveled as far on foot as I did on camel-back—if he tells the truth! But it took me five hours to reach the city from the sea on camel-back. Yet he made the journey on foot in only one hour more. How fast does the one-eyed man walk? As fast as a camel, even trailing?"

The girl Ghail stared at him. Her face went blank. It was a five-hour journey from the sea to the city. She knew it as well as Tony. That was by camel. On foot it would take a man ten hours or better. If the one-eyed man had trailed the camels, he could not possibly have arrived so soon. Not possibly.

"A whirlwind followed me all the way," said Tony, swallowing. "And—I killed a one-eyed man with a slit nose as he and two companions tried to rob me. Somehow, I think that the one-eyed man who got the three camels sometimes doubles as a whirlwind."

His conscience was strickenly silent. But Ghail knitted her brows and stamped her bare feet and snapped a number of Arabic words she had never taught Tony. They crackled. They sparked. They seemed to have blue fire around the edges.

"The misbegotten!" she cried furiously: "The accursed of Allah! From his own mouth came the proof that he lied! And we saw it not! *He* was the *djinn!* He has made mock of the wisdom of men! How he will laugh, and all his fellows!"

She turned upon Tony. "And you—you are as stupid as the *djinn!* Why did you never ask about your camels?" She paused suspiciously. "But—were they camels? Perhaps they also were *djinn!* Perhaps it is all a trick! You may be another *djinn!* This might be—"

Tony threw up his hands. "In my world," he said helplessly, "*djinn* are fables."

"Your world?" snapped the girl. "How many worlds did Allah make? And if *djinn* are fables, why is the throne of Barkut empty?"

"On the coins?" asked Tony as helplessly as before.

She stamped her foot once more. “On the coins and in the palace! What sort of fool are you? You say you are human? Will you drink of the *lasf* plant?”

She fairly blazed scorn at him; scorn and vexation and at least the beginning of bewilderment. Tony tried to placate her.

“If *lasf* is not something spelled backwards with added vitamins, and if other humans drink it, I have no objection at all!”

She jumped to her feet and hurried to the barred gateway of the courtyard adjoining his cell. She spoke imperiously through the bars. Even a slave girl can be imperious to other slaves, on occasion. And there was always somebody passing that barred gateway, with full freedom to look in. Tony had chafed at the fact—and been reproached by his conscience for chafing—when Ghail first began her daily lessons in Arabic. Lately he had become resigned. But he still wished stubbornly that things were different.

She came back with a polished brass goblet containing a liquid. She tasted it carefully, as if its contents might be doubtful, and then offered it to Tony.

“This is *lasf,”* she said sternly. “It is poisonous to the *djinns.* If you drink, it will be of your own will.”

Tony drank it. From the expression on her face, it seemed to be an action of extraordinary importance. He was tempted to make a flourish, but made a face instead. It was not wholly bad. It had a faintly reminiscent flavor, as of something he had drunk before. It tasted a little like some of the herb teas his maiden aunt had dosed him with as a child. From experience he knew that the flavor would last. He would keep tasting it all day, and it ought to be good for something or other, but he could not guess what.

He handed back the goblet.

“I wouldn’t say,” he remarked, “that it would be a popular soft drink back home, but I have tasted some almost as bad.”

Chapter 5

The girl Ghail stared at him in seeming stupefaction. Then, as he regarded her expectantly, she suddenly began to flush. The red came into her cheeks and spread to her temples, and then ran down her throat. He followed its further spread with interest. When it had reached her legs she abruptly ran to the gate and hammered on it, crying out fiercely. Soldiers with whiskers and flintlock muskets appeared instantly, as if they had been kept posted out of sight for an emergency which could only be created by Tony Gregg. They let her out, scowling at him.

He sat down and breathed deeply, staring at the stone wall of his dungeon-courtyard. She'd believed him a *djinn,* eh? *Djinns* were creatures of Arabian mythology. They were able to take any form, and sometimes were doomed to obey the commands of anybody possessing a talisman such as a magic ring or lamp. At other times they could scare the pants off of even a True Believer not so equipped. They kidnapped princesses, whom the heroes of the Arabian Nights unfailingly rescued, and they fought wars among themselves, and they were not quite the same as *efreets,* who were always repulsive, while *djinns* might take the form of very personable humans. They were also not quite so dreadful as *ghuls*—from which the English word "ghoul" is derived—who lived on human flesh.

There was a wooden bench against the wall, at which Tony stared abstractedly. He became aware that it was oscillating vaguely. It thumped this way, and that, and just as the oddity of its behavior really caught his attention, the bench fell over. It tumbled sidewise with a heavy "bump" to the hard-baked clay floor.

Tony looked startled. Then he got up and went over to the bench. At a moment when *djinns* were recently made plausible, erratic behavior of furniture suggesting ghosts was practically prosaic. He examined the overturned object. There was a minor quivering of the wood as he touched it. It felt almost alive.

He heaved it up, so completely off base mentally that he acted in a perfectly normal manner. He was actually too dazed to do anything else. The quivering of the bench stopped. He saw a bug on the hard-baked clay—a beetle, lying on its back and wriggling its legs frantically. It was pressed solidly into the clay, as if the full weight of the bench had thrust it down without crushing it. It was a trivial matter. An absurd matter. It was insane to bother about a bug on the ground.

But as he looked down at the wriggling black thing, its outlines misted. A little dustiness appeared in mid-air, down by the floor. Then

Tony Gregg's hair stood up straight on end, so abruptly that it seemed that each separate hair should have cracked like a whiplash. He backed away, goggling.

And a tiny whirlwind appeared, and rose until it was his own height or maybe a little more, and then an amiable but unintelligent female face appeared at the top of it. The face was two feet wide from ear to ear. It was a bovine, contentedly moronic face with no claim whatever to beauty. It beamed at him and said:

"Sh-h-h-h-h!"

Tony said:

"Huh?"

"There is danger for me here," said the female face, beaming. "I have hidden here for days. I was"—it giggled—"that beetle under the bench. Before that I was a fly on the wall. My name is Nasim. Please do not tell that I am here!"

Tony gulped. He clenched his hands and stared at the swirl of dust on the courtyard floor. It tapered down practically to a point where he had seen the bug pressed in the clay, but at his own shoulder height it was almost a yard across, like an elongated, unsubstantial top which swayed back and forth above its point of support.

"You are—" Tony gulped. "A—*djinn?"*

"I am a *djinnee*," said the beaming face coyly. Tony gulped again.

"Oh…"

The face regarded him sentimentally. It sighed gustily.

"Do I frighten you in this shape?" it asked, even more coyly than before. "Would you like to see me in human form?"

Tony made an inarticulate noise. The face atop the whirlwind giggled. The mist thickened. Substance seemed to flow upward into it from the ground. A human form appeared in increasing substantiality in the mist. The round face shrank and appeared in more normal size and proportion on the materializing human figure. Tony's mouth dropped open. He abruptly ceased to disbelieve in the existence of *djinns.* He was prepared to concede also the existence of *efreets, ghuls,* leprechauns, ha'nts, Big Chief Bowlegs, the spirit control, and practically anything anybody cared to mention. Because from the small whirlwind a convincingly human female form had condensed.

The pink-skinned, rather pudgy, quite unclothed figure cast a look of arch coyness upon Tony.

"Do you prefer me as a human woman?" asked the figure, giggling. "I would like for you to like me…" Tony caught his breath with difficulty.

"Why—er—yes, of course. But—just in case somebody looks in the gate, hadn't you better put some clothes on?"

The *djinnee* who called herself Nasim looked down at her human body and said placidly:

"Oh. I forgot."

Garments began to materialize. And then there was a clanking at the gate, and then a howl of fury, and a flintlock musket boomed thunderously in the confined space of the courtyard. The pink-skinned, pudgy female form seemed to rush outward in all directions. There was a roaring of wind. A dark whirlwind, giggling excitedly, sped upward and fled away. Even in flight, and in the form of a whirlwind, it looked somehow rotund and it looked somehow sentimental.

Then Tony was almost trampled down by half a dozen soldiers with baggy trousers and slippers and flintlock guns which banged and smoked futilely at the vanishing patch of smoke in the sky. And there was a fat man with a purple-dyed beard, and there was Ghail, the slave girl, with a good deal more clothes on than before. She looked at Tony with a distinctly unpleasant expression on her face.

"Now," said Ghail ominously, "would you tell me the meaning of the *djinn* hussy, without any clothes on, in the very palace of Barkut?"

Tony's conscience caught its breath, and began to express its highly unfavorable opinion of things in general, and of Tony in particular.

Chapter 6

Tony Gregg's conscience, as has been noted, was the creation of the worthy spinster aunt who raised him. Having no more normal outlet for the creative instinct, she had labored over Tony's conscience. And following a celebrated precedent, she made it in her own image. In consequence, Tony often had a rather bad time.

That night his conscience, which seemed almost to be pacing the floor in anguish beside his bed, gave him the works. Horrible! Horrible! said his conscience. Here it had spent the best part of his life trying to make him into a person who, in thirty or forty years of devotion, scrupulous attention to his duties, and a virtuous and proper life, would attain to the status of a brisk young executive. Tony's conscience conveniently ignored the fact that after thirty or forty years of virtue and scrupulosity, Tony would neither be young nor brisk. And what had Tony done? demanded his conscience bitterly. He had won more than eleven thousand dollars in the low and disreputable practice of betting on horse races. But had he invested that windfall in gilt-edged securities? He had not. He'd come on a wild-goose chase across half the world, to arrive at this completely immoral and utterly preposterous place of Barkut! He had spent three weeks in jail! His conscience metaphorically wrung its hands. And now—now a slave girl who showed her legs aroused his amorous fancy. Worse, a female *djinn* with no modesty whatever—

Tony yawned. He felt somewhat apprehensive about the *djinnee* who said her name was Nasim, but he was certainly not allured. He was even almost grateful, because the slave girl Ghail had been in the sort of rage a girl does not feel over the misdeeds of a man she cares nothing about. And Tony felt a very warm approval of Ghail. It was not only that she had nice legs. Oh, definitely not! He approved of many other things about her. And besides, she was a nice person. She treated him like an individual human being, and during all his life heretofore, Tony had been surveyed as a possible date, or a possible husband if nothing better turned up, but rarely as a simple human being.

He turned over in bed. He was no longer in his cell, but in something like a bridal or royal suite in the palace. It was so huge that he felt a bit lonely. The ceiling of his bedroom was all of twenty feel tall, and arched, with those sculptured icicles he had seen in pictures of the Alhambra in Spain. The floor was of cool marble tiles, with rugs here and there. The bed itself was hardly more than a pallet upon a stand of black wood ornamented in what certainly looked like gold. The coverings were silk. There was a pitcher of some cooling drink by

his elbow, and if he pulled a silken bell cord a slave—male—would come in and pour it out for him.

His position in Barkut had changed remarkably during the day. At the moment of the excitement over Nasim, Ghail had brought a chamberlain with a purple-dyed beard to explain that his imprisonment had been all a mistake. He had been believed a *djinn,* clad in human form for subversive political activity within the city. Since he wasn't a *djinn*—and drinking the *lasf* proved without doubt that he was not—and since he had told the girl Ghail that when he talked to the rulers he would be high in favor and rich, the rulers were naturally anxious to know what he had to offer in exchange for favor and riches. Also—the slave-girl put this in a bit sullenly—if the king of the *djinn* of these parts had sent a *djinnee* at great risk into Barkut to beguile Tony, it was evident that the *djinn* also attached great importance to him. So the rulers of Barkut wanted also to know what that importance was.

Tony had been led to a great hall with zodiacal figures in brass laid flush in the black marble floor. The throne of Barkut stood beneath its canopy against the far wall. It was empty. There were six ancient men seated on rugs before it, smoking water pipes. They smoked and coughed and wheezed and looked unanimously crabbed and old and ineffective. But their red-rimmed eyes inspected the slave girl before they turned to Tony, so he felt that there was some life somewhere in them yet.

They greeted him with fussy politeness and had him sit and then wheezingly asked him who he was and where he came from, and generally what the hell the shooting was about.

The slave girl Ghail intervened before he could answer. She explained that Tony came from a far country, and that he had crossed the farthest ocean on a great flying bird. Tony had told her as much, lacking an exact Arabic term for a transatlantic plane or even for a converted four-motored bomber. He had traveled farther, Ghail added, in a boat of steel with fire in its innards. This was a repetition of Tony's description of the somewhat decrepit steamer from Suez to Suakim. And these things, Ghail said firmly, she had believed to be lies from a more than usually stupid *djinn.* But since Tony was no *djinn* but a human, who was inexplicably sought after by the local *djinn* king, she believed them absolutely.

The six councilors smoked and coughed and made other elderly noises. Tony opened his mouth to speak, and again the slave girl forestalled him.

In his home land, said Ghail truculently, Tony was of a rank second to none. This was her interpretation of his attempt to explain that nobody in America was of higher rank than even he was, as a

citizen. He was a prince, Ghail elaborated, journeying in quest of adventure and to see the peoples of the earth—an activity considered highly appropriate in princes. His people had so subdued the *djinn* that they, though only humans, rode in the air with ease and safety, and spake to each other privately though a thousand miles apart, and traveled in personal vehicles with the power of forty and fifty and a hundred horses, and were mightier in war than any other people under the sun.

These statements also Tony had made in the course of his language lessons. He had thought Ghail impressed, then, and she was not an easy person to awe; and now she repeated them parrot-like, with a belligerent air, as if daring anybody to question them. In short, she said, Tony was a very dangerous person. On the side of Barkut he would be dangerous to the *djinn*. On the side of the *djinn*—and the king of the *djinn* had already tried to allure him by the charms of a *djinnee*—he would be dangerous to Barkut. Therefore he should either be secured as an ally of Barkut, or else executed immediately before he could set out to help the *djinn*.

Tony said feebly, "But—"

"Did you not tell me that you were in the greatest of all wars?" Ghail demanded. "In which millions of humans were killed? Did you not say that your nation ended the war by destroying cities instantly, in flame hotter than the hottest fire?"

Tony had unquestionably mentioned atomic bombs. He had also said that he was in the war. He had not mentioned that he spent it at a typewriter—because, of course, Ghail would not know what a typewriter was.

"So you," said the slave girl firmly, "will swear by the beard of the Prophet to lead the armies of Barkut to victory over the *djinn*—or else—"

* * *

Ultimately he swore, gloomily and at length, on a book with a binding of marvelously ornamented richness. It was a Koran, and he had never read it and did not believe its contents. More, he did not know what sort of beard the Prophet had affected, so it could not be said that there was a meeting of minds, and possibly the contract was not really valid. But he felt an obligation, nevertheless.

Late that night, unable to sleep, it recurred. The ancient men of the Council of Regents of Barkut had given him their confidence out of

the direness of their need. The slave girl Ghail counted on him, because there was no one else to turn to. The danger to Barkut from the *djinn,* he gathered, was extreme. The plant *lasf* was a partial protection against the *djinn,* but bullets merely stung them, and *lasf* grew constantly more difficult to come by, and the *djinn* grew bolder and bolder as the humans in Barkut ran into the technological difficulties inherent in a shortage of *lasf.* Four years ago, the king of the local *djinn* had, in person, kidnapped the authentic queen of Barkut and now held her prisoner. Hence the empty throne and the Council of Regents. For some reason not clear to Tony, the ruler of Barkut could not actually be injured by a *djinn,* though her subjects were not so fortunate. Therefore the Queen's only sufferings were imprisonment and the ardent courtship of the *djinn* king. Still…

Lying wakeful in bed in the royal suite of the palace, Tony surveyed this statement of the situation with distrust. It sounded naive and improbable, like something out of the Arabian Nights. It was. Like all the events stemming from his purchase of a ten-dirhim piece in an antique shop on West 45th Street, New York, it was so preposterous that he pinched himself for assurance that his present surroundings were real.

They were. The pinch hurt like the devil. He rubbed it, scowling. Then he heard a thud on the windowsill of his bedroom. He got out of bed, suspicious. He went to the window. Nothing. It looked out upon a small garden, there to please the occupants of this suite. There were grass and shrubbery and small trees and a fountain playing in the starlight. It smelled inviting. Beyond lay the palace, and beyond that the city, and beyond that the oasis and the desert. And somewhere—somewhere unguessable—lay the dominions and the stronghold of the *djinn* beyond the desert.

His conscience wrung its hands. In the fix he was in, to be thinking about *djinns* and captive queens and such lunatic items! How about those fine plans for an import-export business between Barkut and New York? What had he learned about the commercial products of Barkut? What was the possible market for American goods? If he went, with no more than he now knew, to an established firm in New York to get them to take up the matter, what information could he give them that would justify them in offering him an executive position? Why, if he'd only confined his attention to proper subjects like exports and imports instead of trying to rouse the romantic interest of a long-legged slave girl, nobody would ever have thought of asking him to lead an army.

Rubbing his leg where it hurt, he gazed out into the garden and rudely thrust his conscience aside. That garden looked romantic in the starlight. He wouldn't mind being out there right now with Ghail…

Something stirred on the windowsill almost beside his hand. He started, and in starting dislodged one of the soft silken cushions that were everywhere about this place. It fell to the floor. He saw a tiny dark shape on the sill, like a frog. He groped for a shoe to swat it with, and it jumped smartly into the room. It *was* a frog. He could tell by the way it jumped… but it landed on the cushion with a whacking, smacking "thud" such as no frog should make. It sounded like a couple of hundred pounds of steel mashing a pillow flat and banging against the floor beneath. The pillow, in fact, burst under the impact. Stray particles of stuffing flew here and there. The frog disappeared within. From the interior of the burst cushion came explosive swearing in a deep bass voice.

Then the split silken covering inflated and burst anew, and a swirling luminous mist congealed into a solid shape, and Tony found himself staring at an essentially human form. It had the most muscle-bound arms and shoulders he had ever seen, however, and a chest like a wine cask, and a wrestler's knotty legs. Its head and face were of normal size; but it took no effort whatever to realize that the features were those of a *djinn.* The slanting, feral eyes, the white tusks projecting slightly from between the lips, the pointed ears—it was a *djinn,* all right, and a *djinn* in a terrible temper.

"Mortal!" it roared. "You are that strange prince who came across the desert!"

Tony swallowed.

The creature revealed additional inches of tusk.

"You are that creature, that mere human, who ensnared the love of Nasim, the jewel among *djinnees!"* It pounded its chest, which resounded like a tympany. "Know, mortal, that I am Es-Souk, her betrothed! I have come to tear you limb from limb!"

Tony's conscience said acidly that it had told him so. He was not aware of any other mental process. He simply stared, open-mouthed. And the *djinn* leaped on him with incredible agility.

* * *

Sinewy, irresistible powerful hands seized his throat. They tightened, and then relaxed as the *djinn* said gloatingly:

"You shall die slowly!"

Then the hands tightened again, bit by bit.

Tony had not lately taken any systematic exercise greater than that of punching buttons in an automat restaurant. It was hardly

adequate preparation for a knock-down, drag-out with a *djinn.* He clawed at the strangling hands with complete futility. Then a strange calmness came to him. Perhaps it was resignation. Possibly it was a lurking unbelief in the reality of his experiences, somewhere in the back of his mind. But being strangled, even if it were illusion, was extremely uncomfortable. He remembered a part of the basic combat training he had received before being assigned to sit at a typewriter for the glory of his country's flag. An axiom of that training was that nobody can strangle you if you only keep your head. All you have to do—

Tony did it. Because being strangled is painful.

He reached up with both hands, and in each hand took one—just one—of the *djinn's* sinewy fingers. One complete human hand is stronger than the single finger of even a *djinn.* Tony peeled the single fingers ruthlessly backward. Something snapped.

The *djinn* howled and hooted like an ambulance. Tony hastily repeated the process. Something else cracked. The *djinn* howled louder, and let go. There were dim shoutings and rushing in the corridors of the palace. But Tony remained alone, gasping for breath, in the high-ceilinged room with this creature who said he was Es-Souk the betrothed of Nasim. By now Tony remembered Nasim only as a beaming misty face and a pudgy human figure which had seemed exclusively pink skin. Es-Souk swelled to the size of an elephant, beating his breast and hollering.

Tony coughed. His throat hurt. He coughed again, rackingly.

The monstrous, and now unhuman, figure sneezed. The blast of air practically knocked Tony off his feet. Then Es-Souk uttered cries which were suddenly bellowings of terror. He sneezed again, and the silken bed sheets flapped crazily to the far corners of the room.

Then the *djinn*'s figure melted swiftly into a dark whirlwind which poured through the window. There were poundings on the door, but Tony paid no attention to them. He reeled to the window and stared out.

A shape fled in panic among the stars. It was a whirlwind of dark smokiness, but the stars were very bright. It showed. The whirlwind which was the *djinn* Es-Souk fled in mortal terror—or perhaps immortal terror—from the neighborhood of the palace of Barkut. And as it fled, it paused and underwent a truly terrific convulsion. Lightnings flashed in it. Thunder roared in it. The whole sky and the countryside were lighted by the flashings.

When a whirlwind sneezes, the results are impressive.

Chapter 7

Tony was wakened by the firing of cannon. His heart sank. An attack of some sort upon the city of Barkut? His conscience expressed bitter satisfaction at the possible impending consequences of his misdeeds, all done against his conscience's advice. But Tony listened to the cannon-shots. They were fired at regular intervals. Which might mean a salute, or might mean something of a ceremonial nature, but certainly didn't mean guns being aimed and fired as fast as they bore on their targets.

He got out of bed and dressed. He had folded his trousers carefully and put them under the mattress of his bed. The result would not have satisfied him in New York, but here it was the nearest approach to a crease in his pants he'd had since his arrival. He put them on. He felt better. He began to tuck in his shirt tails.

The door opened. His breakfast, evidently. Two dark-skinned slaves carried a gigantic silver platter on which was piled the better part of a roasted sheep. Fruit. Coffee. Bread, which was in thin, flexible, doughy sheets more suited for the wrapping of packages than the making of breakfast toast. With the two male slaves came two slave girls in garments quite appropriate for indoors in a hot climate. They were gauzy and not extensive. One of the girls carried some kind of musical instrument. They smiled warmly upon Tony as he finished tucking in his shirt.

"Your breakfast, lord," said one of them brightly. "The City rejoices in your victory."

"Victory?" said Tony. "What victory?"

"The defeat, lord," said the prettier of the two slave girls, "of the *djinn* who was sent to slay you who are the hope of Barkut. The cannons fire and the people dance in the streets. There will be decorations and fireworks."

Tony's conscience was skeptical. He shared its view. But the cannon boomed, nevertheless. Tony's neck was sore this morning, and he had cold chills down his back at odd moments. Breaking the *djinn*'s fingers had been a sound Army trick, but this Es-Souk had immediately afterward swelled to the size of at least a hippopotamus, and as soon as he stopped roaring he'd have tackled Tony again, and then there'd have been nothing but a blot left of Tony. Tony still didn't know what had made Es-Souk sneeze or flee in such palpable bellowing terror. Tony's conscience said, with something of the bite of vitriol, that the *djinn* had doubtless sneezed from an incipient cold, and that these two slave girls weren't any too well protected against draughts, either.

He regarded them interestedly as the great silver platter came to rest on folding legs, convenient to his bedside. The two male slaves bowed deeply and departed. The booming of cannon continued. The two girls stayed.

"Hm…" said Tony. "You two—"

"We serve you, lord," said the girl with the musical instrument. She seemed quite happy about it. "I play and Esim dances, or she plays and I dance, and both of us carve your meat and pour your sherbet and serve you in all ways."

Tony regarded them again. Slave girls. Unveiled. Very sketchily attired. Very pretty. A charming idea of hospitality. Ghail had nicer legs, but—

His conscience snarled at him.

"So the cannon fire because of my victory!" he observed, reaching out for coffee.

One of them passed it to him, reverently.

"Aye, lord," she said brightly. "Never before in the history of Barkut has a man defeated a *djinn* in single combat. Were they not so stupid, we had been their subjects long ago."

He drank the coffee. So nobody before had ever defeated a *djinn* in single combat? In that case, maybe some sort of celebration was in order. But he gloomily wished he knew how he'd done it. He scowled.

"You seem sad, lord," said the one called Esir, anxiously. "Esim has made a song of your victory. Would you wish that she sing to cheer you?"

Tony grunted. His conscience observed warningly that he did not know anything about the local domestic habits. Perhaps, despite the veils and swathing robes women wore in the streets, it was an old Arabic custom to provide strictly musical entertainment with breakfast in a guest's bedroom.

"You two are slaves?" he asked, as one of them anticipated his reach for an orange and swiftly halved it for him and handed it to him with a tiny golden spoon for him to eat it with.

"Aye, lord. Your slaves," said the two in unison, beaming.

Tony strangled on his first spoonful of orange pulp. They pounded his back anxiously. He coughed and blinked at them.

"You mean—"

"You came to Barkut without attendant, lord," said Esir, happily, "and it was not fitting. So the Council gave us to you, with horses and other slaves, that you might be suitably served. And all of us, your slaves, wished to kneel to you immediately, but Ghail the slave girl said that you had told her you did not wish to be disturbed last night, and therefore we only waited your summons—which did not come."

Tony absorbed the statement. It required considerable absorbing.

He opened his mouth, and they hung upon his impending words, and he closed it without saying anything. So, Ghail had kept him from having these two girls to dance and sing for him last night, eh? His conscience said something half-hearted about Ghail doubtless having his best interests at heart, but it had said too much in the past about her nonchalantly displayed bare legs. He did not heed it.

"Tonight," said Tony with decision, "things will be different."

They gave him the brightest and most joyous of smiles.

"And may we watch, lord," said Esim hopefully, "when you slay the other *djinns* who will doubtless be sent to murder you tonight?

Tony choked again. That was something he had been trying not to think about. The people of Barkut were, apparently, rather casual about *djinns* in spite of the long-continued war and the captivity of their official ruler. On the two occasions when *djinns* had turned up to Tony's knowledge, the people had not run away, but had come howling with rage to attack them. Flintlock muskets had bellowed after the *djinnee* Nasim as she fled in the form of a whirlwind. Palace guards had been spoiling for a fight and were actually breaking down the door of Tony's apartment when he opened it for them after Es-Souk's departure. These people would put up a battle, and were not averse to it. But still they said that no one man had ever before conquered a *djinn* in single combat.

It was something that needed to be looked into. And then Tony had an idea. Rather strangely, he had altogether failed to use his ten-dirhim piece for guidance since his arrival in the city of Barkut itself. The reason was simply that he hadn't needed it to decide anything. He'd been quite content with things as they were. Even imprisonment in the dungeon-and-courtyard had not been bad. He'd been busy learning Arabic, with Ghail around to look at appreciatively—

But now the *djinns* were after his neck. Now he needed to know what to do.

He finished his breakfast and stood up. The two girls brought him a golden basin and water to wash his hands. They watched his every movement with a breathless absorption which was almost childlike and was certainly flattering. Dismissing them, he patted one on her bare shoulder. She made a little movement as if cuddling against his hand while she smiled at him. He patted the other—

They went out the door, smiling worshipfully back at him. He found himself whistling as he dug in his pocket for the ten-dirhim piece. He regarded it affectionately. When he was a brisk young executive with a residence in Barkut suitably staffed with male and female slaves, it would all be due to this coin! And now this coin would give him some needed advice.

He flipped it. He flipped it again. And again and again.

Half an hour later, when Ghail came into his apartment—and he noted disapprovingly that she was wearing more clothes than ever—he was sunk in abysmal gloom. The ten-dirhim piece was no longer informative. It turned up heads and tails completely at random. It contradicted itself. It had no longer any special quality at all. It was at home. It was in its own world. The attraction; the gravitation; the singular force which prevented the indiscriminate mixing-up of objects of different worlds by causing coincidences which kept them at home—that force was gone. Because the coin was back where it belonged and was no longer endowed with any property urging its return.

Ghail regarded Tony with an enigmatic expression.

"Greeting, lord," she said in a tone which had all the earmarks of suitable slave-girl humility, but somehow was not humble at all, "there is news of great moment."

Tony felt inclined to groan. Among other things, he foresaw that he would be in for a bad time with his conscience presently.

"What is the news?" he asked drearily.

"The King of *djinns* has sent an embassy," Ghail told him. "He offers greetings to the prince beyond the farthest sea. He admires your prowess and desires to look upon the champion who defeated Es-Souk in single combat. He has punished Es-Souk for attempting to slay a human in a merely private quarrel. He offers a truce, safe conduct, and an escort of his private guard."

Tony's conscience said indignantly that when an important message like this was at hand, Tony should be ashamed to be looking at Ghail and mooning about how much better looking she was in less costume.

"What should I do?" asked Tony. "As I recall it, I pledged myself to destroy him, the other day. Yesterday, in fact. Do I tell him I'm in conference?"

Ghail shook her head frigidly.

"You should accept," she told him with no cordiality at all. "If you refused, he would think you were afraid."

"To be honest about it," said Tony, "I am. Have you any idea how I chased that *djinn* away last night?"

She looked at him in amazement.

"I haven't either," said Tony. "He was strangling me, so I broke a couple of his fingers and he let go, howling. Then he swelled up to the size of a gigantosaurus, bellowing, while I coughed my head off. He was just about to come for me again when he started to sneeze, and he went into a panic and flew out the window like his tail was on fire. I haven't the least idea why."

The slave girl looked at him strangely.

"He sneezed? But *lasf* sometimes causes that! Not always, but sometimes. Had you *lasf?"*

"Not unless it was on my breath—which isn't unlikely," Tony said gloomily. "It's foul stuff and the aroma lingers on. I had a drink of it yesterday. You gave it to me."

"Lasf is poisonous to the *djinn* but not to human beings," said Ghail with some reserve. "We anoint our weapons and bullets with it before we go out to fight the *djinn.* It is very poisonous to them. They run away. Sometimes they sneeze. But *lasf* is very rare. The *djinn* pay the Bedouin of the desert to uproot and destroy it wherever they find it."

"Like DDT," said Tony morbidly, "with bugs hiring rabbits to sabotage the whole business." He had to use English words where he did not know the Arabic equivalents. She listened, uncomprehending. "Never mind. If you don't know how I did it, nobody knows, so that's that. So—I have to visit this *djinn* king, eh? If it's under safe-conduct, I suppose I'm safe from further strangling until I get back?"

"Oh, yes," said Ghail. "You and your attendants are safe until you return. Of course you will be offered bribes to betray us, and persuasion, and he may try to frighten you, and"—her voice grew suddenly angry—"he will have his *djinnees* try to beguile you. He does not want you to lead our armies against him."

"I'll try to resist the bribes and the beguilings, too," said Tony. Then he shuddered. "If what I had yesterday was a fair sample… Tell me, where do I get this reputation as a general?"

Ghail said coldly: "I told the Council about the war you were in. Also, that *djinnee* in the courtyard may have been listening for days. One way or another, it would get back to the *djinns."*

Chapter 8

Tony had been standing. Now he sat down. He looked at Ghail. He said, changing the subject:

"What's the matter, Ghail? You act as if I had bleeding gums or something equally repulsive. When you thought I was a *djinn* you didn't act this way."

Ghail said: "There's nothing the matter." Then she added pointedly, "Did you enjoy your breakfast this morning?"

"That roasted sheep wasn't necessary," admitted Tony. "The coffee and fruit would have been enough. Did you arrange it?"

"It was thought," said Ghail coldly, "that since I had talked to you often I might know your likes and dislikes."

"Hm…" said Tony. "You picked out those slaves—the two girls who were part of the present made by the Council?"

Her lips tensed. "I did. I hope they please you."

"It evidently didn't occur to you," said Tony in gentle reproach, "that you could have included yourself in the gift. That is the only criticism I could offer."

She stamped her foot.

"I am the personal property of the Queen!" she snapped. "The Queen is a prisoner of the *djinn.* I cannot be bought or given save of the Queen!"

"It would be nice," Tony submitted, "if you could be persuaded."

She turned her back on him and started for the door. Tony said: "By the way—when do I start for the *djinn* king's court? And you said the safe-conduct includes my attendants. Do I tell Esir and Esim to pack up for a trip?"

"You do not!" Ghail said shortly. "You will have but one attendant. You will start before nightfall. The *djinn* will provide mounts and accommodation for you and one other only!"

"I suppose—"

"You will go," Ghail said shortly, "because the *djinn* king invited you. I go as your pretended slave, but actually to take necessities to our captive Queen."

Tony looked at her. He raised his eyebrows.

"The journey," said Ghail haughtily, "will be made on the camels of the *djinn,* which are actually *djinn* in the form of camels. They travel like the wind. What would be four days' journey by human travel will be accomplished in no more than three hours."

"I was sure," said Tony in some regret, "that somehow you would manage to make it unsatisfactory. All right! Thank you."

* * *

He watched gloomily as she went out the door. Life, he reflected, had been a great deal more simple when he was a prisoner in a dungeon with a courtyard, instead of a general of armies he hadn't seen yet and a prince who had to make journeys to the courts of nonhuman entities he hadn't believed in before yesterday morning. At least, while he was a prisoner, Ghail had been around a lot, in a costume of limited area, and she'd been interested in him, if scornful. Now she seemed scornful of him and not interested. She rather resembled his conscience.

His conscience said sternly that though an untutored slave girl, reared in a highly unfavorable atmosphere, she at least showed a devotion to duty and a sense of moral values which Tony was not displaying. Only Heaven knew, said Tony's conscience, what enormities he might commit at any time, now that he had ceased to heed his proper mentor—it was fortunate that this poor slave girl had a sense of duty!

To this Tony replied that Ghail's sense of duty had led her to pick out two very attractive slave girls as presents for him, and since he was going off somewhere and didn't know when he'd be back, he might as well call them in and have some music while he waited.

He stood up to pull the bell cord.

Then he saw a stirring down at floor level out of the corner of his eye. He whirled with something like a gasp. After the affair of the dungeon courtyard and the windowsill last night, he was becoming jumpy when bugs and frogs and other small objects moved in his neighborhood.

Two of the marble tiles of the floor were rising where they joined, as if something swelled beneath them. Tony stared, momentarily paralyzed. A green shoot appeared and grew. Leaves appeared at its tip as he watched. Branches spread out, and more leaves, and then a bud. The bud swelled. It opened into an enormous lush blossom of a violent magenta hue. And then the flower rearranged itself. It became a miniature head—and there was the beaming, sentimental face of Nasim the *djinnee,* wearing her explicitly minus-I.Q. expression of amiability.

"Sh-h-h-h!" said the face in the flower, coyly.

Tony gulped. "I'm sh-sh-h-h-shed," he said. "What's up?"

"I'm sorry about Es-Souk," said the *djinnee,* beaming. "He's so jealous! He can't help it, poor thing! The king has put him in jail and it serves him right!"

Tony said: "Oh!"

"I felt that I had to tell you I was sorry," said the *djinnee,* almost simpering. "You're not angry with me?"

"Oh, no," said Tony. "It wasn't your fault."

"That's so good of you!" said Nasim. She regarded him with adoring, cowlike eyes from the flower bush. "I've been hiding in a crack as a little moth's egg, waiting to tell you how sorry I am. But there's been somebody around all the time."

"Yes," said Tony. "There has been."

"Would you like me to take the form of a human woman?" asked Nasim hopefully—and giggling—"for a while?"

"You'd better wear some clo—" began Tony in apprehension. Then he said desperately, "Better not. Somebody might come in."

Nasim beamed. "All right. But you're going to our king's court. I'll see you there! I'll be around!"

"I'm sure you will be," said Tony dismally.

"I'm watching over you," said Nasim beatifically. "Since I heard about what Es-Souk tried to do on my account, I made up my mind to watch over you night and day. And I will! Night and day!"

Tony stared at her, appalled. There was a small noise outside the door. Nasim said sentimentally:

"I hate to go like this, but somebody's coming." She beamed. "I'll be a little grease spot on the floor. Mind, now," she added archly, "don't step on me!"

The flower and blossom and all the leaves and branches seemed to contract smoothly. Suddenly they were not. The marble floor tiles fell together with a clink.

A delicate tapping on the door. Esir and Esim poked their heads around the door frame. Their faces were hopeful, and at the same time distressed.

"Lord!" said Esir plaintively. "We hear that you go on a journey! Do we go too?"

Tony sighed.

"I'm afraid not," he admitted. "Affairs of state, and all that. I'm taking only one attendant, and I've not choice of that one."

"But, lord," protested Esim, "we have just been given to you and we do not even know if we please you or not!"

They came into the room. They were young and shapely. They pleased him very much. They were openly eager for experimental evidence of this fact, and looked at him imploringly.

I like you both very much," said Tony. "In fact—" He thought back along a lifetime in New York, spent on subways and in automats and over double-entry ledgers, with only one interlude pounding a typewriter in an army camp. "In fact, I think I could be perfectly happy here in Barkut but for one thing."

They said anxiously: “Lord, what is it that keeps you from happiness?”

Tony sighed deeply. He said in deepest gloom: “Dammit, there’s no privacy!”

Chapter 9

The *djinn* camel was twenty feet tall, and it ambled through the night over the desert with monstrous strides. There were bright stars overhead, and a low-hung moon to cast long shadows; there was a camel-guard of *djinns* riding other *djinn* camels on every hand. Altogether the picture was one of barbaric magnificence. Wind swept past the contrivance which did duty as a cabin on the huge ship of the desert. The contrivance reminded Tony forcibly of the inside of a British miniature car, minus the instrument board. But it did not ride so smoothly. The size of the camel did not change the nature of its gait, and it would not be wise to burp while the animal was in motion.

Tony looked out a window at their escort. Ten-foot *djinns* on twenty-foot camels. Bearded, mustachioed, tusked and pointed-eared monstrosities, with spears as tall as their camels, with monstrous scimitars as tall as Tony himself, with garments of silk and velvet and garnished with gigantic precious stones which gleamed even in the moonlight. A hundred of them, no less, keeping close formation about the beast on which Tony and Ghail the slave girl rode.

In the moonlight, the *djinn* guard looked bored. It probably was boring, Tony reflected abstractedly, to be plodding at a mere forty miles an hour over endless sand, on the back of an acquaintance metamorphosized into a camel who would presently expect you to change places with him. This kind of exchange was taking place with some regularity. At least camels and their riders dropped out of formation and fell behind, and presently new camels and new riders came hurrying up from the rear to resume the place that had been vacated.

A lurching of the camel threw Ghail against him. She was veiled, now, and swathed in all the drapery of a woman dressed for travel or the street. She was singularly remote, too. Back at Barkut's city gate, she had climbed the ladder to the camel cabin—at the height of a second-story window—with an air of extreme aloofness, ignoring the demoniac *djinn* guardsmen waiting about. Tony had been unable to match her dignity as he scrambled up and joined her in the small, close coupe. The guard had formed up about them and they had gone sweeping away into the desert darkness, leaving the city's faint and twinkling light behind. Ghail had spoken no word then, and she did not speak now. The silence was burdensome. A moment later the camel lurched again. Tony was thrown almost into her lap.

"I'm sorry," he said politely. "Bad road, this."

"There is no road," said Ghail composedly. "We have reached the foothills of the mountains, and the *djinn* are not used to walking. They

wished to carry us in whirlwinds, but in your name I declined."

"I suppose," agreed Tony, "we'd have gotten dizzy."

He fell silent again. Another monstrous lurch, and Ghail landed almost exactly on his knee. He helped her back into her own place again and said:

"Look here! We'd better have some system about this! I know you disapprove of me thoroughly, but in default of safety-belts I'd better put my arm around you."

The camel seemed to stumble and Tony grabbed. They were suddenly upright again, and his arm was firmly around her and she made no protest.

"I don't disapprove of you especially," she said with some primness, "but all men are alike."

"The observation is remarkably original," he told her. "I suppose you are also prepared to tell me that I do not respect you?"

She turned her head. Her lips were close to his ear. She whispered fiercely:

"The camel is a djinn! It's listening!"

"True," said Tony. "Damn! No privacy even here!"

He stared gloomily out at the moonlit foothills which now had arisen from the desert and seemed to lead on through deeply shadowed moonlight toward mountains which also were alternately shadowed and shining ahead. He suddenly felt a soft hand groping for his. It pressed his fingers meaningfully. He squeezed back, encouraged beyond expectation. But the hand was snatched away.

Soft warm breath on his neck. A furious whisper in his ear:

"I wanted to tell you something! Here is lasf. In tiny glass phials you can break in case of need. Then no djinn will come near you. It is for your protection!"

Tony put out his hand again. One very small smooth glass object, the size of his thumb or smaller. He put it away. He reached again. Another. A third. He put them in separate pockets to avoid the danger of breaking them against each other. He put his lips to her ear.

"Thanks. Have you some for yourself?"

"Of course! And some for the Queen, to protect her when you lead our armies to her rescue—when you are ready to destroy the djinn. Now you had better talk, since you have begun!"

He leaned back, as well as he could considering the violent and erratic movements of the *djinn* camel's gait. He suddenly began to feel better. After all, qualified privacy on a *djinn*'s back might have its points.

"Hm…" he said aloud. "In my country the *djinn* have been subdued so long—they're kept on reservations—that humans don't bother about them any more. I've even forgotten the stuff one learns

about them in first grade at school. It seems extraordinary to me that they can change their size so much. Their shape, yes. In my country even human women can do remarkable things to their shapes with girdles and falsies. You'd hardly believe! And of course they change their coloring. But size, absolute size, no…"

Ghail stirred uneasily. But she spoke as primly as before.

"Djinns are elastic," she said. "With the same amount of substance they can be as large as a whirlwind. Or as small as a grain of sand, though no one could possibly pick them up—for always they weigh the same."

"You mean," asked Tony, with interest, "that a *djinn* in the shape of a bug or—hm—a moth's egg, weighs as much as when he or she is a camel and that sort of thing?"

Ghail caught hold of his right hand, and held it firmly. "That is it, yes," she said shortly.

"Then that," said Tony blithely, "explains why the bench in the courtyard turned over. A *djinn* beetle was climbing on it. It explains a lot of things."

Ghail held his left hand. She ground her teeth. "Thanks," said Tony. "Since we don't get thrown around so much this ride is much more fun, isn't it?"

Ghail turned her head and whispered in his ear, strangling with fury:

"As soon as you have destroyed the djinn I am going to kill you!"

Tony beamed in the darkness inside the small cabin on top of the lurching camel. Ghail held his hands, muttering fiercely. His arm was about her shoulders. The combination made the bumping and swaying and unholy undulations of the beast not at all annoying—to Tony.

"There's another thing I'd like to ask about," he said cheerfully. "When you were teaching me to speak your language, you wore a very sensible hot-weather costume. I mean, there wasn't too much of it. About like the bathing suits girls wear back at home. And you very properly didn't seem embarrassed. But that was only when you thought I was a *djinn.* As soon as you found out I wasn't, you got all bothered. In fact, you blushed in the most unlikely places… Why?"

She said through clenched teeth:

"Djinns are not human. I would not be embarrassed before a cat, either. Or a slave. But a man, yes!"

"Yet Esir and Esim—"

"They would have been embarrassed too, before they were given to you and were your slaves." Her voice quivered with fury. "I am dressed as I am because I travel with you."

Then she hissed into his ear:

"When this is over I will see that you are boiled in oil! You will be fed

to dogs! You will be torn into little pieces—"

Tony's ear tingled pleasantly. He continued to beam in the darkness as the twenty-foot camel which was actually a *djinn* went swaying and lurching through the night.

It had been two hours' journey across the desert proper—a caravan might make forty miles a day if pressed, but this camel made that much in an hour—and it was another hour before the *djinn* king's court appeared to be nearing. The evidence of approach was fairly obvious. The troop of *djinn* guards approached a narrow pass between precipitous cliffs. It was guarded by two colossal shapes with flaming eyes. They stood forty feet high, in gleaming armor, and they carried battle-axes whose blades were more than a man-height wide, with shafts the size of palm trees. They challenged in voices like thunder. The cavalcade halted. A guttural voice gave a countersign. The gigantic guards drew back. Tony watched with interest.

"Very impressive," he said judicially. "But actually, you tell me these are simply *djinn* who have extended themselves—decompressed themselves, you might say—to reach those rather excessive dimensions. At that size they're not much more substantial than so much fog, are they? How can they handle such axes?"

"The axes," said Ghail shortly, "are a part of themselves. *Djinns* can take the appearance of a chest of coins or jewels, which seem like many objects. But to pull away one coin or jewel would be to pull away a part of the *djinn.* You could not. The axes are a part of their form. So are their garments and the ornaments they wear."

"Hm," said Tony, "I see."

The cavalcade went on. The pass through the mountains grew more narrow and more straight. The cliffs above it grew steeper, until the giant camels with their giant riders rode in utter darkness with only a ribbon of star-studded sky above them. Then the pass turned, and widened a little and narrowed again. The entrance to the farther and still narrower part of the pass was completely closed by something only bright starlight enabled Tony to believe he saw. It was the head of a dragon with closed eyes, seemingly dozing. It completely filled the pass. Great nostrils the size of subway tunnels gave out leisurely puffs of smoke the size of subway trains.

The caravan moved up to it and halted. The leader of the guard bellowed. The great eyes of the dragon's head opened. Each was as large—so Tony estimated—as one of Macy's plate-glass windows. They looked balefully down at the *djinn* trooper.

He bellowed again. The nostrils puffed. Then the gigantic mouth opened. It looked rather like the raising of a drawbridge for the passage of a tow of coal barges. It gaped wide. Flames played luridly, far down the exposed throat.

The caravan moved smartly into the wide-held jaws. It went comfortably down into the flame-lined maw—

And suddenly the low-hanging moon shone brightly on a wide valley with the palace of the *djinn* king in the distance. It was huge. It was ablaze with lights. And the passageway to it was lined with giants whose feet, only, were visible. Legs thicker than the thickest tree trunks rose overhead. Bellies protruded rather like fleshy stratocumuli, hundreds of feet above the camels of the caravan. The heads of the giants were invisible. Tony felt very small. To reassure himself he said amiably to Ghail:

"It must be a fairly calm night. If not, expanded as they are, even a light breeze would make these giants wobble all over the place like captive balloons."

Ghail put Tony's right hand firmly in front of him. She released it. She took his left arm and removed it firmly from her shoulders.

"We are almost there," she said shortly. "You will ask that I be taken to our Queen in her prison, that she may have the solace of a human woman to weep with her in her captivity."

There was sudden uneasiness, even anxiety, in her voice. In fact, it wavered a little. And Tony knew why she was frightened. She traveled as his slave. Here, among the *djinn*—

"I'll do that," he told her almost remorsefully. "I've been pretty much of a beast, haven't I? But I'll see that you're toddled off to your Queen while I see the king and listen to his offers of bribes."

She adjusted her veil and swathing robes.

"You will not see him tonight!" she said bitterly. "You will be shown to your apartment, and there he will send refreshments and entertainment to beguile you so that you will wish alliance with him instead of Barkut! There will be wine, and *djinnees* in the form of women, and everything that is disreputable to appeal to a man!"

Tony managed to look shocked. Actually, it sounded interesting.

"You mean that *djinn* are as immoral as all that?"

"Of course!" she said more bitterly still. "They are stupid! They are unbelievably stupid! So of course they are immoral! And if they were not stupid, and probably if they were not immoral, we humans would have no chance against them at all! And it is because men are so stupid that they are so immoral, and—and—"

Suddenly, she was crying. And Tony patted her shoulder comfortingly, and took aside her veil and wiped her eyes. And as suddenly she was not crying at all, but looking at him very strangely.

"What—what do you think of me now?" she asked in a small voice.

"My dear," said Tony with a sigh, "I think you are probably the most intelligent girl I ever met in my life."

The caravan halted before the intricately sculptured gateway of the *djinn* king's palace, and there was no more time for even semiprivate conversation.

Tony descended from the camel in a very stately fashion. To the gorgeously robed *djinn* chamberlain who greeted him in the king's name, he relayed Ghail's request—that she be allowed to share the captivity of the Queen of Barkut during his visit. Shortly, Ghail went away behind a *djinnee* who was at the moment some twelve feet tall, of a greenish complexion, and wearing a necklace of diamonds each one of which was a good deal larger than a baseball. Tony chatted amiably with the chamberlain who greeted him as a prince and a general of Barkut.

"A most comfortable journey!" said Tony, as a procession formed up to escort him to his quarters. "Your camels, in particular, arouse my admiration!"

He swaggered in exactly the manner of the solitary general he had come in contact with in the greatest war of the human race.

"Admirable!" he repeated in that general's very tones. "The one who carried me is a very pearl among camels!" The camel he had ridden turned its head. It looked at him sentimentally. It sighed gustily. It giggled.

Nasim.

Chapter 10

Tony was, he admitted regretfully, disappointed. He'd marched to his assigned quarters in the palace between long lines of *djinn* courtiers, who should have dazzled him with their silks, satins, jewels, and furs. But once a slight noise behind him made him turn his head, and he discovered that the courtiers he had just passed were sneaking away hastily, and he strongly suspected that they were running around ahead of him to assume new forms—including new costumes and jewels—and stand in line again. And, since in assuming a new form they also provided themselves with the costumes and ornaments that went with it, he remained undazzled even by ropes of pearls as big as hen's eggs, and rubies as big as grapefruit, and so on and on. Jewels of that sort, he was able to remark to his alert and highly suspicious conscience, were in rather bad taste. If you tried to pull one off—though that would be bad taste too—it would be like trying to take away somebody's nose or ear. The jewels were, in fact, not marketable commodities. They were in effect paste, and therefore showed a lamentable lack of imagination.

His conscience bitterly reminded him of Ghail's forecasts of libidinous entertainment waiting to refresh him after his journey. Tony brightened. He was more than a little tired, but he had often wondered—as who has not?—whether what the censors cut was one-half so lurid as the stuff they passed.

There was a guard of honor in the anteroom before his suite. Tony went through the motions of inspecting it.

Twelve-foot giants looked down at him through yellow cat's-eyes with airs of truculence. The commander of the guard grandly asked for the countersign for Tony's personal guard for the night. Tony thought of Ghail.

"The word," he said, "is 'Solitude.' "

Then he went to look at his bedroom.

Like the rest of his lodging it was on a scale of lavishness to be found only in three-million-dollar-budget motion pictures. His bed had apparently been carved from a tremendous limpet-shell; the walls were iridescent; the furniture was onyx and gold; his quarters in the palace in Barkut were practically sub-minimal housing by comparison —yet he could not find a thrill in it. Ghail had spoiled everything by that unfortunate comment on the ability of *djinns* to take any form they wished, including chests of coins and jewels. It spoiled things for him. It spoiled even the effect of the utterly lavish, super-tremendous banquet hall to which he was presently taken for refreshment.

He was very hopeful as the affair began, but he fell into gentle

melancholy as the *djinns* gave him the works. They intended, evidently, to give him the sort of evening that would be a True Believer's dream. And from their standpoint it was undoubtedly total entertainment without even the sky as a limit. But Tony derived only a morbid pleasure from the anguished moans of his conscience as the floor show progressed. To a citizen of the United States, accustomed to a nineteen-dollar radio for music, TV girl-shows and the Radio City Music Hall as seen from a dollar-forty seat, practically any bathing beach in summer, and an occasional burlesque show over in New Jersey, the thing was pathetic.

A normal male inhabitant of Barkut might have been ravished—in several senses—by the crystal bowl of wine which was big enough for several girls to swim in, and by the girls who did swim in it. But Tony had seen colored movies of an All-American girls' swimming meet. An unsophisticated Arab might have been enchanted by the *djinnees* who wore human forms and practically nothing else and who sang lustily and danced enthusiastically for Tony's benefit. But he had seen precision dancers both in person and on the stage. Also, these *djinnees* misguidedly strove for beauty after Arab notions, and in consequence were markedly steatopygian, which is to say, bell-bottomed. So that when by *djinn* standards the performance was at its hottest, Tony was moved to homesickness. There is an art in doing the bumps. There is a definite technique to the striptease. And the *djinnees,* willing workers as they were, didn't have it.

Tony's conscience screamed shrilly at the beginning, when he failed to rise and depart amid blushes. But as he sat, a sad and lonely and a disappointed figure, immune to the lavish immorality of the *djinns,* his conscience was amazed. It had been prepared for the battle of its existence, and was girded for it. But antibodies to vice had been generated in Tony's system—so he assured his conscience—by the various forms of entertainment passed by boards of censorship in the United States. He was unaffected by the temptations of the *djinns* because—via technicolor—he had been tempted by professionals against whom the *djinnees* simply did not stand up. In fact, Tony assured his conscience regretfully, it seemed that where *djinnees* were concerned, he simply couldn't take yes for an answer.

* * *

By midnight he was yawning. At half-past midnight he could keep his eyes open only with difficulty. At one he went apologetically, and

alone, to bed. His conscience could hardly believe it. And when at last it ventured upon those sternly virtuous commendations which, coming from a good conscience, are supposed to be the most precious things in life, Tony yawned again.

But no conscience is approving for more than the briefest of intervals. Tony's almost instantly afterward observed that it was outrageous for him to think of sleeping in his clothes! He hadn't drunk enough for that! He opened boredom-bleared eyes and looked wearily around the magnificence of his sleeping apartment, and regarded the bed which was surely large enough for more than one person. He had had his lesson. He saw nothing but seemingly insensate furniture. But he knew better. Benches might totter and fall at any instant. Floor tiles might crack. And he confessed, to his conscience, what may have been the true reason for his insensibility:

"I just feel," he said drearily, "that I haven't any privacy."

And then he slept.

Came the dawn. And with the dawn came Nasim. It was so early that Tony had barely opened his eyes. He was thinking those more or less gloomy thoughts with which a man customarily greets a new day, when a small whirlwind some three and a half feet high came in through the doorway of his room. Atop it, Nasim's beaming countenance glowed with excitement. Tony turned over and realized that he had slept fully dressed, including his shoes. He sat up wearily.

"Hello, Nasim. Thanks for the camel ride. That was you, wasn't it?"

She giggled. "I asked to do it. I said it would be a privilege. It was!" Then she said, "That slave girl doesn't like you! It's terrible! A slave girl not liking her master! And you don't like her either. You said she was intelligent. I'm glad I found out! I was going to make a study of her so I could take her form and fool you some day. It would have been a good joke on you! But now I won't."

For some reason, Tony's hair tended to stand up all over his head. But he yawned.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't, if I were you. It wouldn't be amusing." Then he asked, "How'd you get past the guards? Somebody told you the countersign?"

She giggled again. "I was a little centipede running along the floor. They didn't see me. Anyhow, the king wants me to find out why you were bored last night. Were you"—she sighed and looked at him hopefully—"were you being true to me?"

Tony felt a sort of inward jolt. Nasim, in his mind, was associated with beetles and moth eggs and grease spots. Now centipedes, too.

"I guess that was a sort of—mm—by-product of something else, Nasim," he said forlornly. "I just didn't feel romantic last night. That's

all. Did the king say anything else about me?"

"He's going to execute Es-Souk for trying to kill somebody he's decided he wants to be friends with," said Nasim virtuously. "And he wants you to watch. I feel sorry for poor Es-Souk! He couldn't help being jealous of me! And also the king's terribly anxious to find out how to make you his friend instead of a general for Barkut."

"Do you know," said Tony, "I'd give a lot to know why he's so anxious!"

Nasim beamed at him; just a plump little whirlwind three and a half feet tall, spinning in the middle of Tony's bedroom, which itself looked something like the foyer of a super-plushy hotel at thirty-five dollars a day without bath. She looked, Tony reflected dismally, rather cute for a whirlwind. A bit on the chubby side, to be sure, but anybody who cared for whirlwinds would appreciate Nasim. Such a person would be eager to have her for a pet. Still—

"I'm going to whisper in your ear," said Nasim coyly. "And I'll have to take human form to get close enough."

The whirlwind enlarged a little. Tony watched in alarm as a human figure began to show pinkly through the mist which was Nasim as a whirlwind. He grew apprehensive. He called anxiously:

"Clothes, Nasim!"

His cry came almost too late, but not quite. The very last of the mist which was her whirlwind form materialized about her as a Mother Hubbard wrapper of absolute shapelessness. Then she beamed at him breathlessly.

"I always forget, don't I?"

Even in human form, Nasim was chubby. Her eyes were not the elongated animal eyes of male djinns, though, and apparently she had remembered with some care not to have her ears pointed. But Nasim, naturally, could not imagine an expression which was not intellectually *kaput.* She came coyly and sat down on the bed close to Tony. The bed yielded surprisingly under her weight, which gave Tony something to think about.

"I'm going to whisper," she said archly. She bent close—

Ghail, whispering in his ear on camel-back last night, had provided a very pleasant sensation; but somehow Nasim was different.

"The king wants you for a friend because of the way your nation destroys cities in war," she whispered. "In just a bit of a second, in flames hotter than the hottest fire." She drew back and beamed at him. "Now, isn't that nice of me?" she demanded aloud. "Listen again!"

She bent over. Tony listened, trying to think what meaning atomic bombs could possibly have to a king of the *djinn.*

"When Es-Souk is executed, it will be like that," the coy voice

whispered. “They’ll explode poor Es-Souk, and he will be just a terrible explosion hotter than the hottest flame. And I told the king that you told the slave girl your country keeps djinn on reservations. So the king knows that your country must explode djinns to destroy your enemies’ cities, and he’s afraid you’ll tell the people of Barkut how to do it too.”

Tony’s flesh crawled. It was not altogether the discovery that when a *djinn* was executed he exploded. Any creature which could change its size from that of a grain of sand to a whirlwind… such a creature could not be ordinary matter. Not flesh and blood with sex-hormones and mineral salts to taste. It would have to be something different. A mixture of loosely knit neutrons and electrons and positrons and so on—Tony’s knowledge of nuclear physics came from the Sunday supplements—and even that was startling enough, but not horrifying. The thing that made Tony’s flesh crawl was that every *djinn* and *djinnee* must be in effect an atomic bomb. Which could be set off. They’d avoid it if possible, of course. The *djinn* king was scared to death of the bare idea. But no human could feel comfortable sitting on a large bed with an atomic bomb next to him. Especially, perhaps, when the bomb was wearing nothing but a Mother Hubbard wrapper and felt romantic.

Tony got up hastily. Nasim looked reproachfully at him.

“That’s not nice!” she pouted. “I tell you nice things and you jump up! Now you sit right back down here and whisper something nice to me!”

Tony shivered. He racked his brains for a suitable thing to say which would be romantic enough and yet not commit him. He bent over.

“You know other djinns are listening.” he said, dry-throated. “So, of course…” Then he swallowed and went on: “I’m going to ask the king for Es-Souk’s life. I don’t want him to die on my account. I”—he gulped audibly—“I can fight my own battles.” Against atomic bombs, too! his conscience added acidly.

Nasim looked at him in disappointment. “I suppose that’s noble of you,” she said plaintively, “but it isn’t very romantic! You aren’t nice to me! You get angry when I forget about wearing clothes, and—”

“I said only last night that you were a pearl among camels, didn’t I?” demanded Tony harassedly. “After all, you don’t want to rouse the beast in me, do you?”

She giggled, and he added desperately: “—In public?”

“Well…” she said forgivingly, “I hadn’t thought of that. I understand now. I’ll think of something. And I guess I’ll go now.”

She got up and trailed toward the door, a dumpy, rotund little figure in a wrapper that dragged lopsidedly on the floor behind her.

At the door she stopped and giggled again.

"You saying something about a beast just reminded me," she said brightly. "That slave girl you brought with you sent a message. She said that if you can spare time from your beastly amusements, the Queen of Barkut wants to talk to you."

Tony tensed all over.

"How the hell do I ring for somebody to guide me around this place?" he demanded feverishly. "She and Ghail are waiting!"

"Anybody'll show you," said Nasim. "Just ask your servants."

"I haven't any servants," said Tony agitatedly. "Only those guards outside."

"Oh, yes, you've got servants," Nasim insisted. "The king told them not to intrude on you but to be on hand if you wanted them. I'm sure he appointed a friend of mine to be your valet. Abdul! Abdul! Where are you?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony saw an infinitesimal stirring up near the ceiling. He spun to face it. A cockroach—quite a large cockroach—appeared on top of the drapes by a window. It waggled its feelers at them.

"Hello, Abdul!" said Nasim. "The great prince who is the king's guest wants to see the Queen of Barkut in her dungeon. Will you take him there?"

A sudden, geyserlike stream of water spouted out from where the cockroach stood. Hard and powerful, like a three-inch jet from a fire hose. It arched across the room, hit the farther side and splashed loudly, ran down the wall to the floor, and there suddenly jetted upward again in a waterspout which, in turn, solidified into a swaggering short stout *djinn* with a purple turban.

He bowed to the ground before Tony.

"This way, lord," he said profoundly, "to the Queen of Barkut."

Glassy-eyed, Tony followed him out of the door.

Chapter 11

He followed the *djinn* Abdul out the door. Then he stared. There had been a vast anteroom before his suite. He had gone through the motions of inspecting his guard of honor in it. Now there was an enormous swimming pool in its place, with beyond it a luxuriant jungle of hot-house trees. Tony examined it with startled attention.

"It seems to me that this was a little bit different, last night," he observed.

"Aye, lord," said the *djinn* solemnly.

He led the way along the swimming pool's rim. Tony followed. He was worried about the message from Ghail, of course. The night he had just spent had been even aggressively innocent, but somehow he felt that Ghail was not likely to believe it. Her request for him to come to the Queen was not phrased in a way to indicate great confidence in him. But there was not much that he could do about it.

"Interior decoration among the *djinn,"* said Tony, frowning, "is evidently not static art. Things change over-night, eh?"

"Aye, lord. And oftener," said Abdul solemnly. "We *djinn* have much trouble with boredom. We are the most powerful of created things. There is nothing that we can desire that we cannot have. So we suffer from tedium. Someone grew bored with the anteroom and changed the design."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "I have a glass phial in my pocket," he observed. "Can you change the design of that?"

"It is a human object, lord," said Abdul with an air of contempt.

Tony grinned. During the night—during his sleep—his conscience had reached some highly moral conclusions which he was inclined to accept. One was that *djinn* were different in kind from humans, but they were not for that reason akin to the angels. Tony went right along with this decision, recalling the floor show of the night before. More, they were but matter, said his conscience firmly—unstable matter, perhaps, with probably some Uranium 235 somewhere in their constitutions, and in the United States the Atomic Energy Commission would take action against them on the ground of national security. But they were not spirits.

They were material. Grossly material. They knew only what they saw, felt, smelled, and heard. They were limited to the senses humans had. Tony had referred to the glass phials in his pocket. Abdul plainly knew nothing about them and could not mystically determine their contents, or he would have been scared to death. They contained *lasf*. So it was not impossible to keep a secret from a *djinn.* It was not impossible to fool them. It might not be impossible to bluff them.

These were encouraging thoughts. *Djinns* were creatures, and therefore had limitations. They changed massive architectural features of the *djinn* king's palace overnight, but they could not—it was a reasonable inference—change the form of a human artifact. Therefore it was probable that the things they could change were of the same kind of matter as themselves.

Tony's guide opened a door. It should have given upon a passageway of snowy white. Its walls should have been of ivory, perhaps mastodon tusks, most intricately carved in not very original designs. Instead, beyond the door Tony found a corridor which was an unusually lavish aquarium. It had walls of crystal with unlikely tropical fish swimming behind them. The fish wore golden collars and were equipped with pearl-studded underwater castles to suffer ennui in.

Which was a clue. It occurred to Tony that he had not yet seen one trace of a civilization which could be termed *djinnian,* as opposed to human. Everything he had seen was merely an elaboration, a magnification, an over-lavish complication, of the designs and possessions of men. Humans wore clothes, so the *djinn* wore garments made after human patterns only more lavish and improbable. Humans had palaces, so the *djinn* king had a palace which out-palaced anything mere humans could contrive. But the riches of the *djinn* were unstable, their lavishness had no meaning, and they had no originality at all. In his home world, Tony reflected, *djinns* would only really fit in Hollywood.

He cheered up enormously. In his pocket he had three phials of *lasf.* If his opinion was correct, the palace was constructed of the same material as the dragon in the narrow pass, the two colossi before that, and the row of giants on the final lap to the palace gateway. If he uncorked one of the phials, it was probable that the walls about him would begin to sneeze and flee away in the form of whirlwinds—one whirlwind for each unit of the edifice. The *djinn* palace had an exact analogy in the living structures of the army ants of Central America, which cling together to form a shelter and a palace—complete with roof, walls, floors, and passageways—for the army-ant queen whenever she feels in the mood to lay some eggs. But the *djinn* were not sexless like the army ants. Nasim's romantic impulses seemed proof enough of that. And besides—well—the *djinnees* who had danced for him last night had displayed an enthusiasm which simply wasn't all synthetic. They had something more than a theoretic knowledge of what it was all about. What they had lacked was art.

* * *

It was with an increasing feeling of competence, then, that Tony strode off to answer Ghail's summons. He began to anticipate his audience with the king of the *djinn* with less aversion. And somehow, the atomic-bomb aspect of the *djinn* tended to fade away. Ghail had never mentioned anything of the kind. Humans, apparently, did not know that *djinn* were fissionable. So it was unlikely that they could be set off by accident. But it was still hard to imagine getting romantic with an atomic bomb, even if it wasn't fused.

More doorways. They passed through parts of the palace with which Tony was naturally unfamiliar, and whose features as of today he could not compare with yesterday's. Then they reached a quite small, quite inconspicuous doorway, and the *djinn* Abdul stopped before it and bowed low again.

"The residence of the Queen of Barkut, lord," he said blandly.

Tony stepped out-of-doors, onto a sort of dry meadow with patches of parched grass here and there. The sun shone brightly. He heard a bird singing rather monotonously, and he assured himself that no *djinn* was making that noise! A hundred-odd yards away there was a clump of trees and among the trees a small group of mud-walled houses which were plainly human buildings, not too expertly made, with completely human implements about them.

Tony advanced. Someone waved to him, and he felt his heart pound ridiculously faster. But as he drew nearer yet, he saw that it wasn't Ghail. It was a stout, motherly woman with her gown tucked up to reveal sturdy, sun-browned calves. She seemed to have been working in a garden. He saw a neatly hoed patch of melons, and a field of onions and other vegetables. The woman beamed at Tony and said:

"The Queen is in there. You are the Lord Toni?"

Tony nodded. Abdul looked oddly uncomfortable.

"When you go back to Barkut," said the woman, "do try to get them to send us some sweets! We haven't had any sweets for months!" Then she said tolerantly to Abdul: "Not that you don't try, of course."

Abdul wriggled unhappily. "I will wait here, lord," he said sadly. "It is not fitting for a *djinn,* of the most powerful of created beings, to be made mock of by a mere human. Perhaps I will go back and wait by the door."

Ghail came out of the largest building—it would have no more than two or three rooms, and was of a single story—and regarded Tony with a deliberately icy air. She said:

"Greetings, lord."

Just then the motherly woman said comfortingly to the short stout *djinn:*

“Oh, don’t go away, Abdul! I’ll watch your magic tricks for a while—if they’re good ones.”

Abdul wavered. Tony grinned at Ghail. He said critically:

“Of the two of us, you look most like you had a hang-over. Have you been crying?”

“With my Queen,” said Ghail with dignity, “over the sadness of her captivity.”

Then a pleasant slender sun-browned woman came out beside Ghail and nodded in a friendly fashion to Tony. He gaped at her. She had the comfortable air of an unmarried woman who is quite content to be unmarried. Which is not in the least like a queen. The palace of the *djinn* king loomed up on all sides, but here in the center things were different. These houses did not look like a dungeon, to be sure. Here was a meadow half a mile this way by half a mile that, with these buildings and gardens in the center so that it looked like a small farm. The contrast between these structures and the magnificence of the palace was odd enough. The atmosphere of reasonably complete contentment was stranger still. The Queen looked as if she were having a perfectly comfortable time here, and was as well-satisfied as anybody ought to be.

“This,” said Ghail stiltedly, “is the Lord Toni.”

Chapter 12

The Queen smiled. There was flour on her hands, as if she had been cooking something.

"Have you breakfasted, Lord Toni?" she asked.

"Well—no," admitted Tony.

"Then come in," said the Queen, "and we will talk while you do."

They entered a small room, an almost bare room, a peasant's general-purpose room which had the shining neatness of a house with no man in it to mess it up. But this had not the fussy preciosity of too many possessions. There was a small fire burning on a raised hearth, giving off a distinctly acrid smell which yet was not unpleasant.

"You will have coffee," said the Queen, "and whatever else we can find. We are a little straitened for food today, because so much went for your meal last night."

Tony had been dazed, but this was a jolt which showed in his expression. The Queen laughed.

"The *djinns* have their own foods," she explained. "But no human being can eat of their dainties. When I was first made prisoner the king used to raid caravans to get food for me, but it was very tedious! So now I have my own garden, and someone—I think it was Abdul—stole chickens for me. When you came as a guest they asked me for food for you, and I gave it. Of course. You probably did not notice, but no matter what you pointed to in all the dishes they paraded before you, you actually got—" she chuckled—"no more than flesh of chicken, and eggs, and cheese and dates and salad! That was all I had for you."

Tony said: "Majesty, I think I ought to make some appropriate speech. But I don't know what to say!"

She busied herself at the fireplace, and Ghail went quickly to help. The two of them gave Tony his coffee, and a melon, and eggs. It went very well.

"You are going to defeat the *djinns,* Ghail tells me," the Queen said practically. "She assures me you will destroy them to the last small *djinnling.* I hope not."

Tony goggled at her. "But—"

"Oh, I know!" said the Queen. "I am their prisoner, and so on. But in their way they're rather cute." Tony stared.

"I've lived among them four years," the Queen said briskly. "I've had them around all the time. They're a little bit like men, and a good deal more like children, and quite a lot like kittens. I suppose you'd say that I've made pets of them. Of course they won't let me go home, but it isn't bad."

Tony chewed and swallowed, and then said carefully: “I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.”

The Queen shrugged. “They’re terribly vain, like men. If possible, more so. You can do anything with a *djinn* if you flatter him. They’re terrible show-offs, like children. My maid outside can wind Abdul around her little finger any time. He loves to show off his transformations, and she watches him. The other *djinns* won’t. And they’re like kittens because they’re so completely selfish. But that’s very much like men and children, too.”

Tony said in astonishment:

“But they’re a menace to Barkut—”

“Of course!” the Queen conceded impatiently. “They’re dangerous to Barkut in the same way that a troop of—say—wild apes would be dangerous to a village near where they lived. They steal, and they destroy, and they probably kill people now and then. But it’s because they can’t understand people and people can’t understand them.”

“There’s a war—” began Tony.

“Oh, the war!” The Queen dismissed it scornfully. “That’s what all wars are about! Misunderstandings! Marriages are too, probably. Men are so absurd! That’s why I have to stay a prisoner.”

Ghail said warningly: “Majesty!”

The Queen regarded Ghail with impatience.

“My dear, you cannot deny that I am patriotic! I have no children, so I can be patriotic! But for the same reason I haven’t any particular prejudice against the *djinns*. Do you remember how I used to adore horses? I’ve come to like the *djinns* as well, that’s all. I admit that it seems terribly silly to me that I have to stay here because the *djinn* king’s vanity is involved in holding me prisoner! If I were to escape and go back to Barkut, he’d feel that he had to attack it furiously to recapture me. So I can’t go home until he’s conquered. So I simply want the Lord Toni to realize that as far as I am concerned—”

Ghail said again: “Majesty!”

Tony looked sharply at Ghail and at the Queen. Ghail was young and very desirable. The Queen was less young and contentedly undesirous. She laughed frankly.

“Very well, Ghail!” And to Tony she said: “I think that even as a captive queen, though, I can amend my council’s orders to say that it will not be necessary to exterminate the *djinns* completely! I should think, in fact, that if they were suitably subdued, a few tame ones kept around the palace would be quite pleasant. They’d be excellent for the prestige of the throne of Barkut, too!”

Tony said painfully: “Majesty—”

“It’s really too bad you came to Barkut at all,” the Queen said, though with no unfriendliness. “Humans and *djinns* alike believe that

if anybody can bring about a human victory, you can. So the humans won't consent to a compromise until they've tried for conquest. And if they would, the *djinns* would be sure they knew they couldn't win, and they wouldn't compromise until they'd tried for conquest. It's so silly! We really could get along without fighting, if we tried! I've been working on the *djinn* king. He was willing to come to a compromise, but—male vanity again!—only on condition that the Queen of Barkut married him. And that seemed to be out of the question."

"It was out of the question!" snapped Ghail, her eyes angry.

"I was wearing him down," protested the Queen. "After all, if he had his harem of *djinnees*, a private agreement that his marriage to a human queen would be a form and not a fact—"

"Absolutely out of the question!" repeated Ghail, her color high. "Absolutely!"

The Queen sighed.

"I know it is, my dear… and it's too late now, anyhow. The Lord Toni has come. The humans think he's going to lead them to victory. The *djinns* are sure that if he can't, the war goes to them." She looked at Tony, frowning. "Of course you've got to win, Lord Toni! Of course! Humans as the slaves of *djinns* would be in a terrible state! It would be like enslaved by apes or—children! And apes make nice pets—I had one once—and children are doubtless very well, but apes or children or *djinns* would be horrible masters! But the *djinns* are so amusing—"

"I'm getting a trifle confused," admitted Tony.

The Queen nodded kindly.

"I know," she said condescendingly. "You men only really talk to each other. You don't often see things straight. If you only talked to women more… about things that really matter, that is—"

"May Allah forbid!" said Tony grimly. "I've never yet talked to a woman who didn't try to make me apologize for being a man, or any who'd have bothered to talk to me if I hadn't been! You are a queen, Majesty, and you're giving me what I take to be rather complicated instructions. I'm only a man. So whatever I do—because I'm a man—you will explain should have been done differently. No man can ever do anything exactly the way a woman would like him to, but whatever he does, women will make the best of it. So I'm not going to try to do whatever it is you're trying to command. I'm going to handle this my way!"

He spoke hotly, through a natural association of their viewpoint with that of his conscience. Which had reason behind it, at that. But at the same time, he wondered rather desperately what his own way would be.

The Queen regarded him complacently.

"I know. Men are like that." Then she added, "I think you and

Ghail will be very happy."

Ghail turned crimson. She stamped her foot furiously. "Majesty —" she cried. "You go too far—"

There was a small-sized uproar outside. The voice of the stout woman, in alarm:

"Abdul! Abdul! You can't do things like that!"

Tony plunged to the door. At the foot of the wall which was the *djinn* king's palace, almost a quarter of a mile away, there was a twelve-foot soldier-*djinn* who by his gestures had just communicated some message of importance. In the stretch between the wall and the farmhouse, a charging rhinoceros raced at top speed. It plunged toward the small group of buildings. Fifty yards away it seemed to stumble, crash, and in mid-air turned into a round ball with spiral red-and-white stripes which made a dizzying spectacle as it rolled. It was five feet in diameter. It checked abruptly two yards from the Queen's door and there abruptly wrinkled itself, changed color, and collapsed into the short, fat, swaggering *djinn* with a turban who was Tony's guide to this place, who was Nasim's friend Abdul, and who had awaited a summons to duty as a valet in the form of a cockroach atop the window hangings of Tony's bedroom.

He bowed profoundly.

"Lord," he said, "there is a message from the king. Es-Souk, who was to have been executed today for your amusement, has escaped from his prison. He undoubtedly seeks you, lord, to attempt your murder before his own death, since he cannot live under the king's displeasure."

Tony felt himself growing just a little pale. He remembered fingers closing on his throat, and an elephant-sized monster in his bedroom in the palace at Barkut, beating its breast before falling upon him to demolish him utterly.

That—irrelevantly—suggested the only possible source of action. Tony gulped and said:

"Thank you, Abdul. Tell the king I am very much obliged for the warning. But tell him not to worry about it. I won't need any extra guards. I'll handle Es-Souk. In fact, I'll help hunt for him as soon as I've—as soon as I've refilled my cigarette lighter."

Chapter 13

He went back into the house. His knees felt queer. He fumbled in his pockets. He brought out the lighter, and then brought out one of the small glass phials Ghail had given him in the camel cabin on the way across the desert—one of those containing *lasf.*

Ghail looked pale, too.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded. Her voice trembled.

"Attend to Es-Souk, I hope," said Tony, with quite unnatural calm. To the Queen he said: "Your Majesty, if you have any pet *djinns* around at the moment, you'd better chase them out. I'm opening up a phial of *lasf.*"

"But—"

"I've got an idea." said Tony. "It doesn't make sense, but nothing makes much sense any more. I'm going to take advantage of what I think is a generally occurring allergic reaction among *djinns.*" The words "allergic reaction" had no Arabic equivalent, so he had to use the English ones, and to Ghail and the Queen of Barkut they sounded remarkably learned and mysterious. "And just to make sure, I'd appreciate it enormously if you'd draw me a picture of the leaf of the *lasf* plant."

He unscrewed the seal of the cigarette-lighter tank. It was bone-dry of fluid, of course. It hadn't been filled since Suakim. And while confined in his later cell it had been extremely annoying to have to get a light for an occasional cigarette, rolled from local tobacco, from a brazier kept burning by the guards outside his gate. Now the lighter was a godsend. If he was right about *lasf,* a cigarette lighter was the ideal weapon in which to use it.

He extracted the stopper of the small glass phial. With not especially steady fingers he poured the liquid into the tank. It soaked up and soaked up. Its odor was noticeable. Presently the wick was moist. He re-sealed the tank and snapped down the lighter's cover. He re-stoppered the phial and put it away.

"Now I'd like to wash my hands," he said unhappily, "and—is that the picture of the *lasf* leaf?"

The Queen had stooped and traced an outline on the clay floor of her dwelling. She said:

"I'm quite sure. Yes."

Tony stared at it and sighed in enormous relief. Ghail brought a bowl of water. He washed his hands with meticulous care. He dried them on a cloth she handed him.

"If you keep pet *djinns* around," he observed, "better burn that cloth. Right away. And I'd empty the water on soft earth and throw

more earth on top of it. No use revealing that you've got *lasf* around, until you need it. The faintest whiff would give it away to them."

Ghail said again:

"But wh-what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to hunt Es-Souk," said Tony. "I think the *djinn* king is putting something over on me. I had a fight with Es-Souk in my bedroom in Barkut. He ran away. There's been talk of atomic bombs and the king thinks I can make them. But he wants to make sure. I'm under safe-conduct, of course, but if a condemned criminal—Es-Souk—breaks loose and kills me, the king can't be blamed. He'll apologize all over the place, of course. He'll probably offer to pay reparations and indemnity, and salute the Barkutian flag, and all that. But I'll be dead. And the war will go on merrily. You see?"

"But that's—dishonorable!" protested Ghail.

"Nothing's dishonorable," said Tony, gloomily, "unless you can prove it. And you'd never prove that! Just helping hunt for Es-Souk is no good. I've got to meet him in single combat, somehow, and whip him again so the king will know I do it without mirrors or outside help. If I do that, maybe we'll get somewhere."

He turned to go out the door. Ghail caught at his sleeve.

"P-please!" she said shakily. Her eyes were brimming. Tony saw the Queen regarding them critically. He was embarrassed.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Last—last night—"

Tony sighed deeply.

"Listen," he said. "If you want to sign a pledge that the lips that touch *djinnees*, shall never touch yours, you go right ahead! It won't interfere with my plans in the least. Is that satisfactory?"

"I—don't understand," said Ghail faintly.

Tony regarded her in weary gloom.

"Oh, all right!" He spread out his hands, holding the cigarette lighter in one of them. "Maybe you don't. But I'll bet Esir and Esim would!"

He went out the door to find Abdul waiting for him expectantly. Behind the door he heard Ghail sob. He marched heavily off toward the palace door, a quarter of a mile away. Abdul followed interestedly. Tony's conscience spoke to him acidly, mentioning his discourtesy to Ghail and the fact that he hadn't even said good-by to the Queen of Barkut. He snarled at it, out loud. In consequence he did not hear Ghail say, between weeping and fury:

"The—b-beast! Oh-h-h-h, the *beast!"*

Nor did he hear the Queen say approvingly:

"I'm sure you're going to be very happy with him, my dear! You'll never quite know what he's going to do next!"

This was, however, one of the few times when Tony himself did know what he was going to do. He was angry. He grew angrier. The whole affair was simply too pat. It was too perfectly coincidental. It was exactly the sort of thing that the heads of nations in his own world—the heads of some nations, at any rate—had pulled off too many times. Tony had not yet met the *djinn* king, but he felt that he was being manipulated with the sort of smug clumsiness characteristic of power politicians. The *djinn* king in all his official acts was ineffably virtuous and chivalrous. He'd invited Tony to visit him under safe-conduct, he'd provided him with a guard, with entertainment, he'd paid him extravagant honors—and he was arranging for him to be assassinated by someone whom he could afterward execute with every expression of horror for his crime.

"He's a damned—he's a damned totalitarian," Tony growled.

He stamped into the palace, too angry to be scared any longer. There is a certain indignation of the naive and the imaginative which practical men and politicians never understand. The innocent common citizen who believes in hair tonics and television commercials and the capitalist system, believes most firmly of all that justice and decency are going to triumph. He will endure with infinite patience as long as that belief is not challenged. But let him see injustice fortifying itself for a permanent reign; let him see deceit become frankly self-confident; then he explodes! More tyrants and dictators have been overthrown for trying to make their regimes permanent than for all their crimes. In all that had gone before, Tony had been less active than acted-upon. But now he was furious.

He found the fifteen-foot captain of his personal guard of honor. He said harshly to that cat-eyed giant:

"Captain! You will take a message immediately to your king! Say to him that as his guest, I request a favor of the highest importance! I wish a proclamation to be made everywhere within the palace saying that I, your king's guest, have been insulted by one Es-Souk, who after attempting to assassinate me while I slept, fled in terror when I grappled with him. The proclamation is to say that I had intended to ask the king to pardon him so that he could accept my challenge, and that now I have demanded of the king that I still be allowed to do battle with Es-Souk unless he is afraid to fight me. The king, therefore, grants safe-conduct to Es-Souk to an appointed place of single combat, and that the king commands his presence there because of the disgrace to all the *djinn* folk if one of them is too much of a coward to fight a single man. And you will tell the king that if Es-Souk is afraid to fight me—as I believe—then I demand that some other *djinn* take his place unless all *djinns* are afraid of me!"

The guard-captain towered over Tony, more than twice his

height. For the honorable post of official guardian of the king's guest's safety, he had chosen a form neatly combining impressiveness and ferocity. He looked remarkably like an oversized black leopard walking on his hind legs and wearing a green-and-gold velvet uniform. Now his cat-eyes glared down into Tony's. But Tony, staring up, stared him down.

"Incidentally," snarled Tony, "you can tell the king that I'm quite aware that I'm being insulting, and that nobody will blame him if I get killed in single combat of this sort!"

"Lord," purred the *djinn* captain of the guard, "I shall give the king your message."

He saluted and walked with feline grace toward the nearest doorway. There, however, he was momentarily stalled, because some other *djinn* assigned to being a part of the palace had grown bored with the design of his part of the structure, and had changed the door sizes. The captain of the guard had to stoop and crawl through a doorway to go on his errand.

* * *

Tony paced up and down, growing angrier by the second. He had never fancied himself as a fighting man, and he did not fancy himself as one now. He simply felt the consuming fury of a man who feels that somebody is trying to make a sucker out of him. He fairly steamed with fury.

His valet, Abdul, watched him with wide eyes. He saw Tony muttering to himself, white with the anger which filled him. He said unhappily:

"Lord—"

Tony whirled on him.

"What is it?" he demanded savagely.

"You are very angry," said Abdul. "And—lord, created beings do not grow angry when they are afraid. You are not afraid."

"Is that all?" demanded Tony.

Abdul squirmed as if embarrassed. As if embarrassed, too, his whole body rippled in the beginning of a transformation into something else. He repressed it and returned to the appearance of a short, stout, swaggering *djinn* with a turban. But he was not swaggering now.

"It appears, lord," he said apologetically, "that you know you can destroy Es-Souk, or whatever other champion appears to do battle

with you."

Tony glared at him. He thought he could, but he was not sure. His line of reasoning was tenuous, but he believed it enough, certainly, to risk his life on it. Yet he could not have managed that belief, at all, without his hot anger at the clumsily smart trick the *djinn* king had so obviously contrived. It was not fair. It was too smart. And it was complacent. The complacency may have been the most enraging part of the whole thing.

"I am quite willing," said Tony, strangling with fury, "to take on the whole damned *djinn* nation, beginning now, and including your fellow-*djinns* who happen to be the floors and walls of this room!"

Abdul said tentatively:

"Lord, we *djinn* are the most powerful of created beings. Therefore we can only have as our ruler the most powerful of created beings. Any less—any whom we could destroy—it would be beneath our dignity to obey."

Tony turned his back. He paced up and down. There was a pause. Then:

"I take a great risk," said Abdul plaintively. "Lord, will you permit me to obey you?"

"No!" snapped Tony. "Go to the devil! Get out!"

Abdul sighed. Mournfully, but elegantly, he turned into a large mass of black, inky liquid which sank in funeral fashion to the floor and flowed toward the doorway. But it did not open the door—it went out through the crack underneath. Tony was alone.

He looked at the cigarette lighter in his hand. He touched his three separate pockets where phials of *lasf*—one almost empty, now—reposed. He reflected with savage satisfaction that it was not likely that he could be killed without some mangling, and that at least one of the bottles of *lasf* was practically sure to be smashed. And Tony's information on *lasf* was confined to about three sentences from Ghail, and one experience. And the picture of the leaf the Queen had drawn. That was all he knew. But he could extend his knowledge of a common phenomenon in the United States and guess that the Barkutian use of *lasf* was woefully inefficient. With a cigarette lighter he could do better.

The door opened again. The commander of the guard of honor was back. He saluted profoundly.

"Lord," he purred. "The king has made the proclamation you requested. He has appointed a place for the combat. He has given Es-Souk safe-conduct, and Es-Souk has appeared from hiding in the form of a rug on the audience-chamber floor and prepares himself for battle."

"Very well," snapped Tony, "I'll go there at once. If he isn't afraid,

he'll follow immediately."

The *djinn* captain saluted again, with enormous formality, and withdrew for the second time.

Something stirred on the floor. A cockroach waggled its feelers imploringly, turned into an explosively expanding mistiness, and condensed again as Abdul.

"Lord!" said the stout *djinn* imploringly. "Hear me but a moment! The walls of this palace hear and report to the king! I asked to obey you. The king will know. If you do not accept me and protect me, I am lost!"

Tony shrugged.

"Unless," he said skeptically, "this is more of your king's conniving!"

"I swear by the beard of the Prophet!" panted Abdul. "Truly, lord, I can be most useful! Protect me, lord, and you will have the fleetest horse, the swiftest hound… I will carry you to the place of combat! I will bring you the fairest women! I will steal chickens—"

"Hm…" said Tony. "I suspect I did talk too fast. Where is this place of combat, anyhow?"

"I know, lord! I will take you there—"

"Then," said Tony, "let's get started."

"This way, lord!" panted Abdul. "I beg you, lord, protect me until we are free of the palace—and after. Indeed I spoke too soon. Here—the window, lord…"

He raised the window. With an imploring gesture for Tony to follow, he jumped out. Tony walked to the window and looked out. There was no sign whatever of Abdul—but a wide stairway led to the ground from the windowsill. Tony swung up and tested it with his foot. It held. He went down. Instantly he touched the earth, the stairway collapsed into a cloud of dust which coalesced and was Abdul again. He wrung his hands.

"I should have waited," he said miserably. "Indeed, the king will call me a traitor. But if you are truly the most powerful—I am your steed, lord!"

He was. There was a rippling, a shifting, a bewildering alteration of plane surfaces and colors, and he was a highly suitable horse, fully saddled and caparisoned. The horse came trotting to Tony's side and waited for him to mount. He put his foot on the stirrup and heaved his leg over.

"Okay so far," he said grimly. "Full speed ahead."

The horse—Abdul—broke into a headlong run which was convincingly like real panic. It headed away from the palace at a pace even the *djinn* camels of the trip across the desert could not have bettered.

And, as a matter of fact, the appearance of things was enough to justify some apprehension. Word of the approaching duel to the death had evidently spread. Out of the gateway of the palace the *djinns* poured. They wore every one of the eccentric shapes Tony had noted in the line of courtiers welcoming him the night before. There were still some wearing the shapes of human women—those who had danced for him the night before. And as they poured out of the palace, the *djinns* whose shapes were adapted for speed retained them, while others dissolved into forms capable of more miles per hour. The whole assemblage looked like a glorified zoo in flight toward one distant spot. Even the palace began to come apart and join the rush. Item after item of its structure vanished from its place, swelled into a tall and somehow ghostlike whirlwind, and swept away in eager competition for good seats at the spectacle.

When the horse stopped, Tony swung out of the saddle, and the short, fat *djinn* of the turban reappeared. He was utterly doleful.

"Lord," he said bitterly, "my life is in your hands! If you do not win this battle, the king will surely execute me in Es-Souk's stead! I beg you to conquer in this battle!"

Tony wetted his finger to gauge the direction of the wind. He made sure of his handkerchief. He stooped and picked up a pair of medium-sized stones and slipped them in his pocket. Then he waited.

He was in a huge, natural amphitheatre some four miles long by two wide. Its floor was practically desert sand. All about, on the mountainsides, were perched the *djinn.* The foremost rows were dots, but successive rearward rows were larger to get better views, until at the very back tall whirlwinds spun eagerly, reaching ever higher for full vision of what was to come.

The last arrivals settled into place. The entire *djinn* nation watched. Abdul despairingly shivered, and turned himself into a small stone, indistinguishable from any other. Tony waited in the center of the vast open space. And waited.

And waited.

Chapter 14

Tony's conscience said bitterly that since he was going to be killed anyhow, he might as well make a fight for it; but if he'd only listened at any single instant since Mr. Emurian offered him two thousand dollars for that ten-dirhim piece—

He swore softly. He felt singularly absurd, standing in the middle of a dusty, sandy plain with a cigarette lighter clutched in his hand, two small stones in his pocket, and with a multitude of lunatic shapes watching intently from the mountainsides about, and misty, ghost-like whirlwinds spinning expectantly beyond them.

For a long time, nothing happened.

"War of nerves," he muttered indignantly.

The small stone which was Abdul quivered, and seemed to inflate like a balloon. Abdul appeared in his customary shape, very much agitated.

"Lord! Do you see him?"

"Not yet," growled Tony. "I suppose he'll fly to contact as a mosquito and then materialize as a boa-constrictor at close quarters. Stand clear if he does."

"He cannot do it, lord," said Abdul, nervously. "He can take the shape of an insect, but as an insect he will be too heavy to fly. Our weight is the same regardless of our size, lord."

"Good!" said Tony, gratified. "Then in sand like this he can't crawl up as a centipede, either. He'd bog down." Abdul wrung his hands.

"I spoke too soon when I offered you my allegiance," he said bitterly. "It is my opinion, lord, that he will fly to a great height as a giant bird—he will need great wing-spread to fly—and then turn to a stone and drop upon you. That is an accepted form of combat."

"Hm… thanks," said Tony. "If anything else occurs to you, by all means mention it."

Abdul began to shrink. He wailed again:

"I spoke too soo—"

He was a stone once more. Tony could not possibly identify him among the other small stones scattered about. He began to search the sky, and remembered to wet his finger again and recheck the wind direction. There was very little movement of air, but he walked downwind from Abdul and snapped open his cigarette lighter. *Lasf,* as prepared in Barkut, had a distinct, slightly aromatic odor. Tony surrounded himself with a faint fragrance of the stuff. He could smash one of the phials of *lasf* yet remaining and make himself effectually unapproachable by Es-Souk. But he would certainly have to walk

home if he did. And besides, Es-Souk could pick up stones and drop them, bomber-fashion, as easily as he could drop himself. Apparently, though, that was not an accepted form of combat. It appeared that *djinns* were so endowed that they could make anything they chose out of themselves, and therefore did not need to think of using inanimate things. It would not be good strategy to make Es-Souk so desperate that he might begin to have ideas.

And still nothing happened. There was what seemed to be a single dark bird in the sky, far away over the mountain tops. Tony wondered how far away. The larger a pair of wings might be, the more slowly they would tend to flap. Tony watched. The great bird's wings went downward only once in five seconds—it took five seconds for them to make their downward sweep, and recover, and begin another stroke. It looked as if it were flying in slow motion. Therefore the bird was very large, and very far away.

Tony nodded his head. At a guess, Es-Souk had adopted the outward form of a roc, and would gain an altitude of some ten or twelve thousand feet in that shape.

Then he might transform himself into a heavy small stone and try to brain Tony. But it wasn't likely that, as a stone, he could see where he was going or correct his line of fall once he was started. Even U.S. Army bombers, equipped with bombsights, suffered a certain amount of dispersion in their shots.

Inspiration struck Tony. He took off the camel's-hair, belted-in-the-back topcoat. When in human form, *djinns* wore clothes—when they remembered. Nasim was apt to be forgetful. But the clothes they created were a part of them, like their jewels and their weapons. They might know the theory of clothing, but in practice for Tony to take off his topcoat might confuse Es-Souk. He mightn't know whether to aim at the coat or at Tony himself. And besides, if that slowly flapping bird was a roc, and if the roc was Es-Souk, he probably couldn't see too clearly at the height he'd obtained. Tony draped his coat over a small, sparsely leaved bush that startlingly grew in the middle of this waste. He stood back. He was giving Es-Souk two targets to choose from, and the need for choice might be upsetting.

Apparently, it was. The great bird soared in circles for minutes. Then it dived lower, for a better look. Tony stood as still as his topcoat. He could see the shape of the huge flying thing. It was like a giant eagle, only vastly more terrifying. Its body would be seventy or eighty feet long. Its wings would have the spread of a four-motored bomber. Its claws would have the grip of half a dozen steam shovels in one. And its talons would be needle-sharp and more than three feet long. Decidedly, at close quarters, it wouldn't be anything to argue with.

It vanished. Completely. Es-Souk had turned himself into a small round stone hurtling downward from the sky.

Tony counted:

"One—two—three—"

Give the stone time to pick up speed in free fall. The time a parachuting flier waits before he opens his parachute.

"Eight—nine—ten—*Geronimo!*" said Tony.

He ran like the devil for fifty yards, stopped, and watched the spot where he had been. Then his jaw dropped open. His topcoat was running like the devil, too. The bush on which he had draped it was in full flight. As he stared, he saw the twinkling of pink legs under it. Then his topcoat stopped, and turned, and he saw Nasim in human form inside it. She waved gaily to him.

"Hello!" she called brightly. "I'm helping, too!"

WHOOOOOSH!

Something smacked the desert a mighty blow. Dust arose as from a bomb explosion. A concussion wave spread out with such power that Tony felt a puff of wind, and the topcoat went sailing from around Nasim. She had been forgetful again. She went after the coat and picked it up, swinging it cheerily in one hand as she turned to watch.

Es-Souk arose from the crater which he had made as a stone. He had a new form. He was huge and—now—black and terrible to behold. He was a giant of ebony flesh with four-foot tusks and hands whose clawed fingertips were feet in length.

Tony ran toward him, blowing on the wick of the cigarette lighter.

The giant bellowed, but Tony sprinted even faster for hand-to-hand contact. And the *djinn* could not quite take it. Tony's challenge had included so furious an insult to the entire *djinn* nation that it could not possibly be a bluff—and now his confident rush to close in on Es-Souk was daunting.

Es-Souk spurted upward into a whirlwind half a mile high. He materialized as a roc at the top of the column of misty whirling air. The rest of the whirlwind flashed upward to be absorbed in the bird's body. It was an admirable technical solution of the problem of a quick take-off for so large a flying creature. Gigantic flappings of mighty pinions sent the roc soaring away. Es-Souk was uncertain. He did not quite know what to do. To cover his indecision, he suddenly swooped and made what looked like a dive-bomber plunge for Tony.

It was utterly horrible to watch. The monstrous creature, its incredibly curved beak gaping, plunged for him in ravening ferocity. Its claws were stretched to rend and tear. It was as perfectly calculated to inspire panic as any sight could possibly be.

Tony faced it. He had a phial of *lasf* in his handkerchief, now. In

the handkerchief, too, were the small stones he'd pocketed. He held the cigarette lighter in his left hand. His right gripped that singularly innocuous bomb. At the last instant he'd squeeze, crush the phial between the stones, and hurl the dripping handkerchief—weighted by the stones—deep into the gaping throat. He didn't know how quickly it would work, but—

The roc zoomed just as Tony was sending the message to his fingers to tense and smash the *lasf*-phial. The great wings beat horrifically. Sand rose in clouds about Tony, blinding him. He found himself almost buried to his knees as the sand settled about him.

The roc was flapping into the sky again. Nasim ran up to Tony, beaming and offering him the coat.

"You're wonderful!" she said adoringly. "What are you going to do next? And what do you want me to do?" He said indignantly:

"You shouldn't mix into a private fight like this, Nasim!"

"Oh, do let me help!" she pleaded.

"Hell!" said Tony. "Put on something! Put on the coat! How do you expect me to keep my mind on fighting?"

The roc which was Es-Souk made a steep, banking turn. It power-dived at Tony again. And this time Es-Souk had a purpose, a new purpose. He'd seen Tony struggling up out of the sand. So Es-Souk came back only yards above the desert's surface, his monstrous wings beating almost straight back to give him the absolute maximum of speed. Then, only fifty feet from Tony, he swept his wings violently ahead, and not only checked his own speed and sent himself hurtling upward, but set up such a furious smother of swirling sand that Tony was buried breast-deep before he realized what was happening. Es-Souk had made a sizable sand dune with one stroke of his mighty roc's wings. It was sheer fortune that its deepest part did not overwhelm Tony.

He worked his way clear, Nasim pulling anxiously at him—with the topcoat lost again. Tony swore furiously. Something like a bubble appeared in the sand dune's flank. Abdul appeared and arose, with sand grains dripping from his turban. He sputtered and wailed:

"I know I spoke too soon!… Lord! Next time he will bury you, and you will smother, and then what will I do?"

Es-Souk whirled again, low down, and shot back toward Tony again. Nasim said firmly:

"Don't be so stupid, Abdul! Turn yourself into a griffin, with a saddle, and let him ride you to fight Es-Souk in the air!"

Abdul blinked and hastily drew a deep breath. He expanded, to a large round object with no identifiable features. He contracted to something that Tony could not identify, and which at the moment he did not examine. He saw wings and a saddle and a long, serpentine

tail. He made a dash for the saddle, swung into it, and hung on.

Chapter 15

And he felt himself shooting skyward with breath-taking velocity! There was one instant when a huge, feathered body was directly below him—a body so huge that it gave him a queer sensation of being an insect chased by an infuriated hen. Then he was clear and rising. There were great, veined wings beating on either side, there was a scaly body below him, doubtlessly a serpentine tail behind him, and a long, snaky neck in front with a head he could not see clearly.

That neck twisted and a specifically indefinite face appeared—or rather, did not appear. It looked like mist, yet there were eyes in it, and Abdul's plaintive voice came to Tony above the beat of mighty wings.

"Lord," said Abdul miserably, "if you have some weapon to use against Es-Souk, if you tell me how you wish to use it, I will try to give you the opportunity. If you do not win this fight, lord, I am ruined!"

"I've got a weapon, all right," said Tony. "I'd intended to use it on the ground, away from you and Nasim. It's pretty deadly to any *djinn* anywhere near by."

Abdul make a moaning sound.

"But if anything happens to you," said Tony, "I'll have a nasty fall. So—hm… get us some height, and then if you can let Es-Souk dive at me from behind, I think I can use my weapon so you won't be affected."

The desert shrank as the unnamed creature into which Abdul had transformed himself strove desperately for height. Tony found a strap hitched to the saddle, intended to make the rider secure in his place. He fastened it and felt better. He saw the roc, far below, beginning to beat upward with furious strokes of its long pinions.

He tucked away his cigarette case and got out his two stones and the handkerchief and the full phial of *lasf*. He rearranged the stones and the phial in the handkerchief. He tied the whole together, tugging at the corners of the handkerchief with his teeth. The combination made a fairly handy if eccentric hand grenade. But of course it could not possibly explode.

Then he watched with an unnatural calm. Just as in an airplane one has no sensation of height, so on this peculiar mount he felt as if he were in some sensational illusory ride in an amusement park. He even examined the creature he rode, while the mountain tops grew level with him and then sank a thousand feet or more below.

"Abdul," he said. "What on earth are you, anyhow? I've never seen anything like this!"

Abdul said miserably:

"I had indigestion one night, lord, and dreamed this. So I practiced making myself into it. It has been much admired. The touch of having the creature possess no actual, visible face is considered very effective, and I—I thought at one time that Nasim was much impressed by it. But she became betrothed to Es-Souk. I think, lord, that the form I wear might be called a chimaera."

Tony said:

"Nasim liked it, eh?… here comes Es-Souk! Level off, Abdul, and let him get on our tail. When he comes diving in I'll do my stuff, and when I yell you put on the heat. Get away from there fast! Understand?"

"Aye, lord." And then Abdul wailed from that misty emptiness which was the chimaera's face, "If I ever get out of this, I will never speak so soon again! I will never offer allegiance to any other—"

The very mountains seemed like toadstools below them. Tony could see over uncountable square miles of desert and foothills. He even thought he saw a dark smudge against the horizon which might be the oasis and the city of Barkut—

Tony felt a shadow fall upon him—the shadow of the roc, a thousand feet above. It screamed at him.

"Get set now," said Tony, between his teeth. "Ready—let's go! He's diving, Abdul!"

The roc flattened its wings, partly folding them, and came rushing down in a deadly plunge. Actually, Es-Souk was still at least partly bluffed. Tony had been too confident, and Es-Souk was a cagey *djinn.* He'd had one experience of hand-to-hand fighting with Tony, and he had sneezed so horribly that—knowing what he knew—he had been scared to the very last atom of his fissionable being. But since Tony was now some twelve thousand feet above ground-level, on chimaera-back, it would be possible to kill him even more surely than by tearing him limb from limb. A furious assault upon Abdul, in some tender member, should make the *djinn*-chimaera react in typical *djinn* fashion —by metamorphosis. Abdul could definitely be forced to change to something else. And if he failed of absolute presence of mind, he would forget to include Tony's saddle and safety belt in his new shape, and Tony would thump into the desert below in a completely conclusive finish to the duel.

So the roc plunged savagely—seemingly for Tony, but intending a last-second swerve and the chewing-up of one of Abdul's chimaera-wings. In sheer self-defense Abdul must repair the damage by changing form, and—

"Brakes, Abdul!" commanded Tony. "He's not gaining fast enough!"

Abdul slowed—and the roc gained. Closer—closer—its great beak gaping. It was almost time for the swerve and the slashing attack which would send Tony plunging some two miles and more to death.

Tony shouted, "Now, Abdul! Brake hard! That'll make him overshoot—"

Abdul braked. Chimaeras are extraordinarily maneuverable creatures. Abdul seemed practically to stop short in mid-air. The roe almost crashed into him, its cavernous beak widening in awful menace.

Actually, the roc's beak was no more than twenty feet away when Tony squeezed hard on his improvised bomb, felt the glass crunch—and heaved the cloth-wrapped missile into the gaping throat. It was an excellent shot. He saw the little object go flying down the two-yard, open gullet to its maw.

"Roger!" roared Tony. "Step on it! Move!"

Then he felt as if his neck would snap off. Abdul took evasive action. It began with an outside loop that made the safety belt creak hideously, was followed by a wing-over at the bottom, and then continued as a power dive in which the wind went pouring into Tony's open mouth until he felt as if he were being forcibly inflated.

But even then he looked back.

The roc was motionless, as if paralyzed by some awful shock. But the paralysis lasted only for seconds. Suddenly the already huge form expanded still more. It struggled convulsively. It sneezed. In its struggling it had not stayed on an even keel. The sneeze had all the propulsive effect of a high-temperature jet. It kicked the suddenly shapeless object violently higher. It writhed. It struggled again, very horribly. It ceased to be a bird, it was impossible to say what it was! Another convulsion even more violent than the first. The almost amoeboid object shot higher—it had pseudopods now, which appeared at random and flailed aimlessly but with terrific force. A second convulsive sneeze ejected so huge a volume of air with such violence that the *djinn* was shot up a good five thousand feet.

Es-Souk was maddened, now, with the knowledge of his doom. He went into lunatic gyrations which turned into flight straight upward. But he flew now not by wings or any motion of any members, but by the lightning-swift protrusion of a threadlike pseudopod far ahead and the equally lightning-like flowing of all his substance up to and into it, and the instant repetition of the process.

Even huge as he now was, he rose so swiftly as to dwindle as Tony watched. At ten miles altitude there was a convulsive sidewise jerking of the climbing thing. Another sneeze. He continued to shoot frantically skyward. Twenty miles up… he was probably a quarter-mile across, but he became a speck which could barely be

distinguished.

Then he blew up. He must have been fifty miles high, at least. He was in the upper troposphere. And he must have weighed several hundred pounds. Perhaps not all his substance disintegrated. Even human atomic bombs do not detonate with one hundred percent conversion of their mass into free energy. Es-Souk's efficiency as a bomb was probably less than that of purified U235 or plutonium. But the flare was colossal. There was a sensation of momentary, terrific heat. No sound, of course. The explosion took place where the air was too thin to carry sound. For the same reason there was no concussion wave. But the flash of Es-Souk's detonation was several times brighter than the sun and a dozen times the sun's diameter.

Minutes later, Abdul came rather heavily to a landing on the desert. Tony dismounted. Abdul seemed to dissolve suddenly and run together, without any intermediate state, to restore the *djinn* to his short, swart, human form, with the turban atop his head. He was trembling.

"Lord!" he said in a shaking voice. "I did not know how terrible was your weapon! I did not know that you were so much more powerful than the most powerful of *djinns.* Indeed, lord, I apologize for regretting that I offered my allegiance. I did not speak too soon, lord! I did not speak soon enough! And by the beard of the Prophet, I swear that you are my king and my ruler for always!"

Tony swallowed. That flare in the midday sky had been unnerving.

"All right, Abdul," he said. "We'll let it go at that. You've been worried about protection. As far as I can, I'll give it to you—"

"Protection, lord?" said Abdul, beaming. "It is I who will be begged for protection now! My friends who have seen Es-Souk destroyed will come to me begging me to intercede that you do not destroy them also! You will let me boast before them, lord? After all, I was the chimaera on which you rode when you destroyed Es-Souk in such a manner that no others of the *djinn* were harmed! I did help you, to the best of my poor ability!"

"Naturally—" began Tony. Then Nasim's voice came to him.

"You carried him, Abdul," said Nasim proudly, "which is what a *djinn* should do for his king. But I played the part of a proper *djinnee,* too! I held his coat!"

Tony turned to her. He accepted the belted-in-the-back camel's-hair coat. Then he said politely:

"That was very nice of you, Nasim. I appreciate it a lot. But won't you *please* put on some clothes?"

Chapter 16

The palace of the *djinn* king wasn't what it had been. Not only the *djinn* officially off-duty, as it were, had attended Tony's duel with Es-Souk; guardsmen also had quietly transformed themselves from twelve-foot military figures into gazelles, whirlwinds, lions, and other swiftly moving creatures to attend the sporting event. The court, generally, had poured out to see the ruckus. And in addition, various *djinn* serving as towers, pinnacles, rooms, articles of furniture and *virtu,* rugs, hangings, plumbing fixtures and structural elements had taken time off from supporting the state and majesty of the king.

Some of them went back to their assigned positions in the structure after it was all over, but some did not. In consequence, from the official lodging of the Queen of Barkut, the all-encircling palace looked ragged. Here an art gallery was exposed to the blazing sunshine. There the more intimate arrangements of the *djinn* monarch's seraglio were in plain view. And the dusty, thinly grassed meadow within the palace looked like a country fairground on opening day. Some thousands of *djinn* milled about, in all the diverse shapes and forms their personal preferences dictated. Some talked. Some argued. A few—even at such a moment—made such romantic overtures to other members of the race of opposite gender as might have been expected. But on the whole, the several-thousand-odd *djinn* gathered beyond the Queen's vegetable gardens were there to see Tony.

He made his report to the Queen, drinking coffee in her cottage. Ghail moved about, ostensibly assisting the Queen in serving him, but actually listening avidly and looking at him from time to time with widely varying expressions.

"The devil of it is," said Tony querulously, "that instead of making me unpopular, killing Es-Souk seems to have made me something of a hero!"

The Queen nodded.

"They're like children," she said sagely. "Just like children—or apes. Much like horses, too. *Djinns* are great fun! They make lovely pets when you understand them!"

Tony's expression lacked something of full sympathy.

"Somehow," he admitted, "just personally, you understand, I can't imagine wanting to pet a quarter-ton of fissionable material, whether it was in the form of a chimaera or a cute little moth's egg hiding in a crack until the time was ripe for conversation."

"I still don't see," said the Queen, brightly, "just how you set him off—this Es-Souk, that is. Is it a secret of the royal family of your

nation?"

Tony shrugged helplessly.

"I didn't intend to set him off," he admitted. "I did think I might pin his ears back, and with him, the king's, but I didn't anticipate an atomic explosion. But it does make sense, after a fashion. After all, when anything's put into an atomic pile it becomes radioactive, and a radioactive substance isn't immune to ordinary chemical effects. It works just like ordinary matter except for its radioactivity. So it's reasonable enough that perfectly normal, perfectly stable compounds like *lasf* would act chemically on *djinns.* The results, though—"

"Chemically?" queried the Queen. Ghail stood still, looking strangely at Tony.

"Of course," said Tony. "I had you draw me a picture of the *lasf*-leaf. Remember? And I recognized it. We have that plant in my country. We call it hogweed, or ragweed. It's a pest to some humans."

The Queen listened. Tony drank more coffee.

"Ragweed," he said. "Sneezing. You anoint your weapons with it. The *djinns* run away. Sometimes they sneeze. And I'd drunk some of the stuff the other day and that night Es-Souk tried to strangle me, and I coughed. And he sneezed. That's ragweed, all right! The pollen is worst of all. It hits some human people too. You see?"

The Queen said brightly: "I fear not, Lord Toni."

"Ragweed; sneezing; hay fever," explained Tony. "The *djinns* are subject to hay fever. It's an allergy. A racial trait. Ragweed, which doesn't bother most humans, is deadly poison to them. Like DDT to bugs. It's so strong a poison that merely its odor sets them crazy. You people have been wasting the stuff. You've swabbed guns and bullets with it. It dried, and by the time you got to where you were going to fight the *djinn,* most of it was gone. They ran away from the dried, dusty remains that by pure accident stuck to your weapons. You see? That night in my bedroom I had the stuff on my breath. When I coughed, Es-Souk got a whiff of it. And I figured that if so little of it would chase him, the real stuff tossed down his throat would really go to town. And it did!"

He looked hopefully at them. But he knew no Arabic word for "allergy" or "hay fever" or "pollen," or for "radioactive" or "fissionable" or "atomic." Even the English word "ragweed" in an Arabic context did not seem to mean *lasf* to the Queen or Ghail. To the two of them, he seemed to be speaking quite sincerely about matters so erudite as to be beyond their understanding. And at that it would have taken him a week to clarify the word "allergy." They would never have understood DDT. The Queen dismissed the explanation.

"Doubtless it is clear to you, Lord Toni," she observed, "but we poor women find it too involved. You speak of the magics and arts of

your own nation. What shall you do now?"

Tony blinked. Then he remembered his anger.

"I'm going to see the king," he said indignantly. "He arranged that business of Es-Souk's escape, dammit! He expected to get me killed, with himself in the clear! I'm going to give him the devil! And if he acts up," he added truculently, "I'll blow on my cigarette lighter! That will hardly set him off, but it'll scare him green!"

The Queen looked hard at Tony. Then she exchanged an astonished glance with Ghail.

"Have you looked out the door?" she asked softly.

Tony looked, and grew uncomfortable. "Do they have autograph hunters here, too?"

Ghail said firmly, "I do not know whether you are as stupid as you pretend, but certainly you had better go out and speak to those *djinns!* They are impressed enough now!"

"Impressed?"

Ghail said exasperatedly, "Get up! Go out! Let them bow down to you! Then, if you wish, you can go to see the king!" But as he stood up with a bewildered expression, she said softly, "You are very wonderful!"

"What?" He looked incredulous, and then turned swiftly to the Queen. "Oh, yes! Ghail tells me, Majesty, that she is your personal slave and can't be sold or given without your consent. I'd—er—like to have a business conversation with you sooner or later."

Ghail stamped her foot. "Get—out!"

Tony looked incredulous again. He went reluctantly out of the door.

A bull elephant charged toward him from fifty feet away. Tony took one look and reached for his cigarette case. Then the elephant changed smoothly into some thousands of billiard balls in red, green, blue, black and pink, which swept onward in a clacking tide of bewildering intricate motions upon and against each other. The balls shrank as they rolled. Then, suddenly, they jerked to a halt and into the rotund, turbaned, swaggering form of Abdul in one instant.

"Majesty!" said Abdul, beaming. "Your people are gladdened by the sight of you! Will you deign to accept their allegiance now, or will you make a more formal ceremony?"

Tony said:

"Don't talk nonsense! Look here! I was invited to this place to see the king! He tried to get me killed! I'm not pleased with him! If I've got to have an interview with him, I want to get it over with! Then I'll go back to Barkut so the truce will be ended, and come back and start tearing things up. I've a sort of obligation—"

"Majesty!" protested Abdul. "You would endanger your so-

precious life by entering his presence? What would become of me if by treachery—"

Tony scowled. "I'd like to see him try something!" he said sourly. "How about showing me the way?"

He wasn't bluffing. The event of an hour or so ago, plus innumerable other oddities, had created in him a sort of fanatic disbelief in common sense. It suddenly occurred to him that his conscience hadn't said one word to him since the fight with Es-Souk. It did not seem possible that his maiden aunt's acid creation had ceased to exist—but still—

He winced.

His conscience was snarling bitingly that it was still on deck; but that his activities were so illimitably remote from sanity that they had no moral aspect at all. But, said his conscience—and it seemed to raise its voice—when it came to trying to make a business deal for the ownership of a poor slave girl whose morals were demonstrably so much superior to his own—

Tony straightened up. He felt better with his conscience nagging at him. More natural.

* * *

He marched toward the palace. Abdul scuttled around before him and swaggered, waving his arms imperiously for the clearing of a way. There was a swarming of *djinns* to be close to the point of his passage. It was a singular experience for Tony to walk through the mob in a lane cleared for him as if by magic, and to feel upon himself the respectful, avid starings of so many eyes. There were animals' faces and human faces and faces that were far from either. There were birds and reptiles and quaint assemblages of unrelated parts into forms which—like Abdul's chimaera—had probably been dreamed up by their wearers of the moment. There were also three *djinnees,* side by side, still in the same female human forms *they* had worn the night before. They were an odd illustration of the female fondness of fashion, because the night before their forms had included the gauzy draperies of Arab dancing girls. Now that was changed. Nasim's part in the victory over Es-Souk had been seen and noted. The three *djinnees* paid her tribute as a leader of fashion. Beaming at Tony as he passed, they displayed the new style Nasim had set among the lady *djinn:* They were, exclusively, pink skin.

Tony and Abdul walked through the palace. There were places

where there was no longer a roof. The roof-members were out in the prison-meadow where they had waited for Tony to speak to them. There were places where there were no walls. There was one spot where even all flooring had vanished, and Tony saw with some astonishment that beneath the very fabric of the royal palace of the *djinn,* there was sparse grass and sandy soil, as if this particular part of the palace had not even been in existence for very many days.

Abdul made a dignified flourish before the chasm. He leaped agilely outward into emptiness in what might have been a graceful swan dive—and unfolded himself as a portable suspension bridge that neatly spanned the gap. Tony walked across. He did not quite turn in time to see the process by which Abdul returned to his more normal form.

"Majesty," said Abdul blandly, "have you made your plans as yet?"

"Eh? Plans? Hm—not yet," said Tony.

"I am the first of your servants and subjects, Majesty," Abdul told him piously. "I beg you to trust in me for a time—at least until you find a better!"

Tony said impatiently:

"All right. But why do you call me Maj—"

He stopped. As he spoke, he had passed through a doorway. It was but one of dozens he had allowed Abdul to lead him through. But this was different. He had come unannounced and unwittingly into the audience hall of the King of the *Djinns.* It was a colossal hall, some sixty feet high and perhaps six hundred feet long. Its walls blazed with all the phony grandeur the *djinn* assigned to wall-duty could imagine. It was very magnificent indeed.

The group of *djinns* at its far end was less magnificent. There were but half a dozen of them. They were gathered timorously about one of their number, who was patently their king. And he fumbled with what Tony suddenly realized was the only actual artifact he had seen in any *djinn's* hands. It was the only accessory he had noted which was not a part of the *djinn* who wore or carried it.

This object was distinctly non-*djinnian.* The ancient *djinn* who clutched it jealously was plainly bewildered by it. To judge by the crown on his head and various other royal insignia, he could be none but the *djinn* king in person. And he was the first and only *djinn* Tony had ever seen who really looked old. *A djinn* looked always as old as he thought, but the King of the *Djinns* was no longer even able to think of himself as young. He was very ancient indeed, and he was hideously ugly—Tony heard later that there was a trace of *efreet* blood in him—and he fumbled querulously with an object which surely no *djinn* had ever conceived or made.

It was a device of glass and corroded bronze and other metals. The glass part of it was remarkably familiar. It was exactly the shape of one of those fluorescent-ended tubes on whose larger, coated surface an image appears in a television set. The rest of it was completely cryptic to Tony. There were coils, and there was something that could be a condenser, and there were objects which could even be batteries, in age-blackened bronze cases. But the whole was old. Unspeakably old. And, of course, batteries could not be expected to hold a charge after as many centuries as the patina on the bronze implied.

"Greeting!" said Tony sternly. He had his cigarette lighter handy.

The *djinn* king looked up with an elderly start. Then he scowled portentously.

"Hah! The human Lord Toni," he rumbled. "You have betrayed my hospitality, human! It is well for you that I am merciful! But you are my guest! Therefore I take no vengeance on you in my own house. But your camel will return you to Barkut within the hour! The truce between me and Barkut ends! I shall destroy the city and the people. I shall blot out the memory of the nation! I shall—"

Tony found his eyes hot and angry.

"Interesting! You invited me here to have me murdered because you learned that my nation isn't troubled with *djinn!* You were afraid I might lead Barkut to security! But your planned murder backfired, so now you'll try the same thing openly!" Then he bluffed. "And how do you propose to destroy Barkut? You have seen what I can do!"

The *djinn* king glowered at Tony. With somehow the air of one changing costume to a more appropriate garb, he swelled to a greater size. Tusks appeared between his lips. His complexion became a ghastly blue. Horns showed on his head. The armor which appeared at the same time was tastefully decorated with human skulls. But he still looked old. And Tony felt that he was uneasy.

"Human!" he roared. "See you this thing in my hands? It is the great treasure of the *djinn* crown! With this have my *djinns* been kept subject! With this will I destroy Barkut and the sniveling traitors who bow to you! Know you what this is?"

Tony had a hunch amounting to conviction that the *djinn* king had been puzzling over the device when he entered. He had plainly no great knowledge either of machinery or electronics. Tony had not much more. But he simply could not believe that any device of such great age could still be in working order. He bluffed again.

"Of course I know what it is!" he said scornfully. "Every low drinking-place in my nation has one! You look in the large end of the tube!"

Speaking of the device as a television set, Tony spoke with strict

truthfulness. But he felt the jerking tension in the *djinns* about the king grow suddenly less. The king himself relaxed visibly.

"Ho!" rumbled the king zestfully. "That was a matter I knew! I knew that! Ha! I but tested you to see if you truly know this device. Then you know that with it pointed at a rebellious *djinn* or a human city, at any distance I may create explosions beside which the destruction of Es-Souk is as the glow of a firefly!"

The other elderly *djinns* about him laughed uproariously. Their mirth was almost hysterically relieved. It sounded as if the *djinn* king had not known which was the business end of the gadget. He had been trying helplessly to figure out how to aim it. And Tony had told them.

"Go you back to Barkut," bellowed the king gleefully. "Tell the humans there that from my palace I shall destroy them all!"

Tony knitted his brows. He felt cold prickles up and down his spine. He couldn't believe the thing would work, as old as it was. But the *djinn* ought to know! So he said distastefully:

"From your palace? With its walls of *djinns?*" He remembered Abdul's weeping gratitude out on the sand, after the duel was over, because only Es-Souk had perished. "Remember what will happen if by accident you destroy a *djinn* nearby! I do not advise you to use that device. Besides, consider how much more deadly is mine!"

He snapped open the cigarette lighter. He blew gently on the wick. The faint fragrance of *lasf*…

There was instant, howling panic. Abdul flashed out the door by which he and Tony had entered. The king and his councilors fled in tumult. Even the floor of the audience hall heaved and melted away, and Tony tumbled some four or five feet to the ground. He was abruptly in the open air with the palace dissolving all about him and whirlwinds darting away in crazy flight in every direction.

Farthest, and fleeing fastest, seemed to be the king.

But the *djinn* king had not dropped his gadget. Tony hunted anxiously all around. He didn't believe it could work, but still—

He worried about it as he walked gloomily back toward the mud cottage where the Queen and Ghail were quartered.

It shouldn't work. It positively was too old to work! But if it did—

Chapter 17

They started back for Barkut in a state wholly unlike the fashion of their arrival at the *djinn* palace. Abdul arranged the march. He seemed to delight in devising elaborate ceremonies. The parade began with dragons, sixty feet long and breathing fire. After them marched a troop of giants carrying very knobbly maces seemingly of iron, which should have weighed tons. Then a vast, long column of *djinn* camels, each camel the customary twenty feet tall and with an impressive pack load of unstable *djinn* riches, the whole draped with cloth-of-gold and similar stuff. Then *djinn* soldiers, looking remarkably ferocious. Tony and Ghail and the Queen rode in a colossal litter carried between two elephants. It was extremely luxurious, and the only incongruous note was that the Queen had packed a picnic lunch for the journey in crude earthen pots. They were covered over with seed-pearl brocades, however, and did not show.

Such ostentation had not been Tony's own idea. Abdul had presented himself fearfully at the Queen's cottage, almost half an hour after the use of *lasf* in the audience chamber.

"Majesty!" said Abdul reproachfully. "If you detonate me, who am the most abject of your subjects, how will the government go on?"

"Government?" Tony stared. "What government?"

"Of the *djinn,"* said Abdul, more reproachfully still. "You are my king, Majesty. You are also king of these others who wait to swear allegiance. And there must be government!"

"Hold on!" Tony cried. "What's this? What have I got to do with government? How'd I get to be a king?"

"Majesty!" Abdul waved his hands. He had changed his costume, now, and appeared in garments which were exclusively seed pearls with ruby and emerald buttons. His turban emitted a slight and graceful plume of smoke, which looked incendiary but—he had explained—was quite safe under all ordinary conditions. "Majesty, it is simple! You, a human, defeated Es-Souk in single combat, hand-to-hand. This was in the night in Barkut. Such a thing has never before happened in the history of the *djinn.* Today you fought a duel with Es-Souk and detonated him so that no other of the *djinn* folk was even harmed. Only the King of the *Djinns* has even been able to destroy a *djinn.* It has been a thousand years since even our kings have had to resort to this measure, and on the last three occasions—going back more than two thousand years—in each case numerous other *djinns* died in the holocaust of the execution. And before my own eyes and many others you caused the former king and his councilors to flee and a part of his palace to dissolve. You are, therefore, more powerful than

any *djinn*, you are more merciful than any king of the *djinn* in the past, and you are victor in a personal contest with the king we had this morning. Therefore you are the king!"

"The logic is elaborate," said Tony suspiciously, "but it isn't airtight."

"Majesty," repeated Abdul firmly, "you can destroy any of us, or you can spare any of us. Therefore we obey you. And therefore you are the king. It cannot be helped."

The Queen of Barkut looked at him, smiling.

"Obviously," she said brightly. "Abdul is quite right. And you can end my captivity if you wish. What rewards we poor humans of Barkut can offer you—"

Tony looked sharply at Ghail. She flushed hotly.

"All right," said Tony. "So I'm the king. Do we have a civil war, or is my authority unanimously accepted?"

"It is almost unanimous, Majesty," said Abdul, beaming. "It may be necessary to detonate the former king. That, however, is not yet certain. He has fled with a few of his councilors. They feel that you have a prejudice against them—"

"Intelligent of them," grunted Tony. "Very well, then! The first thing is to get Ghail and the Queen back to Barkut. Then we'll start fresh from there. Do you want to arrange matters?"

"For what else," asked Abdul blandly, "did your Majesty make me your grand vizier?"

He bowed to the ground and vanished. The parade formed almost immediately after. It set out across the desert with the celerity of *djinn* traffic. The elephant litter maintained a forty-mile speed principally because the elephants were nearly five stories tall. Whirlwinds went on before, spreading out as scouts on all sides, and overhead some dozens of rocs cruised at different altitudes for an air umbrella against possible attack by the former king and his half dozen malcontents. It was all quite preposterous. The elephant litter itself was the size of an eight-room house and actually contained two floors and different compartments on each floor. The Queen sat gracefully underneath the canopy on the sun deck on top. Ghail sat beside her, her lips tightly compressed. Despite the speed of their journeying, the litter was hot. Ghail, however, remained wrapped up in all the voluminous wrappings of a respectable woman during travel.

"Listen," said Tony, "aren't you hot?"

"I'll do," said Ghail composedly.

"As a slave," said Tony, "the Queen can give you permission to make yourself comfortable. Why not?"

Ghail regarded him ominously. But the Queen said:

"He's right, my dear. Why don't you slip out of that dreadfully hot

cloak?"

"He," said Ghail in even tones, "is very fond of looking at legs. My legs, or anybody else's legs. And he hasn't any *djinnees* with him to sit around like the hussies they are—for instance, that *djinnee* who held his coat while he fought Es-Souk! So he is unhappy!" Then she flared out at Tony. "Why don't you get another litter for yourself? All you have to do is command it! Or we'll get out of this litter and ride on camels, and you can have as many *djinnees* around you as you want! You can—"

Tony scowled. "If you're thinking of Nasim… wait a minute!"

He stood up and went to the rail of the gently swaying sun deck. Alongside, a few hundred yards away, a smaller litter kept pace with this. That was the traveling carriage of Abdul, who had explained blandly that as grand vizier to Tony who was king of the *djinn* a certain amount of state for himself was desirable. But Abdul's litter was merely carried by two thirty-foot camels, and the litter slung between them was no larger than the cabin of an eight-passenger plane. It was suitably less stately than Tony's equipage. When Tony bellowed at it, its interior was completely hidden by silken draperies.

"Abdul!" roared Tony.

The thirty-foot camels intelligently swerved to bring Abdul's litter close. And even so soon, Abdul had attuned himself to react instantly to a call in Tony's voice. Instantly the drapes were torn aside. Abdul beamed across the space between litters.

But for half a breath Tony did not recognize him. Abdul swaggered, of course—but that was part of *his* personality. It was his form which was strangely unfamiliarly familiar. He was, in fact, a duplicate of Tony. He wore exact facsimiles of Tony's soft felt hat, his belted-in-the-back camel's-hair topcoat, and undoubtedly his feet were encased in duplicates of Tony's brown shoes. But the face was still the face of Abdul, and it beamed.

Behind him, in the litter, Nasim also beamed at Tony.

"Majesty!" cried Abdul happily. "What is your will?" Tony stared —and inspiration struck.

"That is Nasim, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Yes, Majesty," called Nasim archly. She came and stood beside Abdul. "Look! Doesn't he look just like you? Isn't he wonderful?"

Tony said sternly:

"It was my thought that I had not yet rewarded Nasim for her aid in the fight with Es-Souk. I see that she has chosen her reward. It is my will that the two of you marry!"

Nasim giggled. Abdul bowed so low that he almost fell out of the litter.

"To hear is to obey, Majesty!"

"And it is also my will," said Tony severely, "that if at any time in the future Nasim comes into my presence, she must have some clothes on! After all, I'm human!"

"Aye, Majesty!" said Abdul. Nasim coyly pulled a drape about herself.

"That's all!" said Tony.

He turned his back. The camel litter swerved away. The Queen seemed to be trying to stifle laughter. Ghail looked utterly infuriated.

"Well?" said Tony.

"If the Queen," said Ghail furiously, "commands that I sacrifice my modesty to the King of the *Djinns* so that he can see if he wishes to purchase me—"

Tony said just as angrily:

"Hold on! I haven't talked business to the Queen yet! But I'll talk it now!" He turned to the much-amused Queen. "Majesty, I understand that I'm the King of the *Djinns.* Most of the riches I'm supposed to have are fake, as you know. But if there aren't any real riches, I'll make these *djinns* of mine work until there are! And I'll pay you any sum you care to name if you'll set Ghail free so she won't be a slave any longer."

His conscience spoke approvingly. Tony snarled at it. The Queen almost choked on her laughter. Ghail's face went blank. She stared incredulously at Tony.

"And—and then what?" asked the Queen.

"Then," said Tony doggedly, "I'll try to persuade her to marry me. It isn't that I'm too damned moral, but I don't think I'd like bought kisses, however legal the transaction might be in this country."

"And—and if she would not marry you?" asked the Queen.

Tony looked at Ghail. Her face was crimson, and though there was no perceptible softening in her expression, her eyes showed distinct satisfaction.

"If she wouldn't marry me," said Tony shrewdly, "then—I guess I'd have to take an interest in music. After all, I understand that Esir and Esim have pretty good voices."

The satisfaction vanished from Ghail's expression. Fury came back.

"I thought," she observed in detached scorn, "that you would not care for purchased kisses."

"But I didn't buy Esir and Esim," said Tony. "They were gifts. That's different!"

Then he ducked. A dark shadow flashed past overhead, so close that it seemed almost to touch the sun deck. It was the monstrous body of a roc, soaring swiftly downward from the sky. It touched ground almost directly before the leading elephant, shivered, and

became a twelve-foot *djinn* in what was probably the *djinnian* air-force uniform. He raced toward the elephant litter.

"Majesty!" he bellowed. "Enemy *djinns* sighted twelve o'clock overhead! Closing fast!"

Tony reacted swiftly. He bellowed for Abdul and roared for a ladder. Instead, the gigantic trunk of the rear elephant swung around and held itself invitingly ready. Tony scrambled on board. Abdul bounced out of his litter in a wild leap, turned into something unusual on the way to the earth, and landed with a splashing of sand. He arose, himself again.

"Majesty!" he said, beaming. "The chimaera form for this conflict?"

"And make it snappy!" Tony rasped. "I don't think anything drastic can happen, but—"

Abdul puffed out into the snaky creation of his nightmare, with its face of mist. There was the saddle as before. Tony climbed into it and buckled the safety belt.

"Go ahead!" he commanded.

There was a sensation of almost unbearable acceleration and he rode upward into the blue.

At five thousand feet they passed the first flight of rocs. The great birds wheeled aside to make room for them and then craned their necks to watch. At ten thousand feet Abdul and Tony passed the second line of air defense. From this height Tony could distinctly see the oasis and the gleaming white walls of Barkut. Still the chimaera hurtled skyward. At fifteen thousand feet the ceiling squadron of rocs was left behind.

Abdul turned his temporarily snaky neck about and said triumphantly:

"Majesty! They flee! From us!"

Now Tony saw the *djinn* king and his few faithful councilors. They were not recognizable as such, of course. With the chimaera climbing vengefully toward them, they had adopted the emergency measures Es-Souk's *lasf* frenzies had led to: They were now mere shapeless objects which flew straight up with lightning-like amoeboid movements. They expanded as the air grew thinner and they needed to act upon greater surfaces for support. But they went up and up and up.

Tony was relieved. He had only one full phial of *lasf,* and he was highly doubtful that he could duplicate his trick of the fight with Es-Souk. Certainly he couldn't handle half a dozen *djinns* with one improvised bomb, and if they attacked with any resolution at all…

The air grew thin as the chimaera climbed. Tony found himself panting for breath.

“Easy, Abdul!” he gasped. “No higher! This is enough!”

The chimaera leveled off. Tony’s heart pounded horribly because of the lack of oxygen at this height. He felt dizzy. He sucked in great gulps of the unsatisfying thin stuff. Then he heard Abdul saying appreciatively:

“Pardon, Majesty! I had forgotten that even you will not wish to be too close to your enemies when they explode!”

Chapter 18

Tony could not answer. The way to live at great heights is not to exert yourself and to breathe fast and deep. He busied himself with getting his breath. Presently he felt a little better. A little, not much. The horizon had broadened for hundreds of miles, it seemed. He saw the halted *djinn* caravan far below. It looked like a short length of string on a sand-colored blanket. But overhead, the climbing, writhing *djinns*—the ex-king and those who still obeyed him—were such tiny motes that, strain his eyes as he would, he lost them.

He understood. Not only was his own weapon mysterious to the *djinn*, so that even Abdul expected him to strike down the fugitives from afar, but there was an even more rational reason for this long climb. Es-Souk, exploding at a fifty-mile altitude, had dimmed the sun and given off a momentarily intolerable heat. If the former king believed that the human-made apparatus Tony had seen would detonate his rebellious subjects at a distance, he must expect a much more terrible cataclysm below. He would get as far away as possible, though he had still to remain in atmosphere for support.

The chimaera soared in huge, easy circles. Abdul said inquiringly:

"Majesty? They have not exploded."

"I—can't see them," said Tony absurdly.

He clung to his saddle, panting. Staying up here was a bluff, while he clung to two possible hopes. Perhaps the *djinn* king could not make the ancient weapon work—that was Tony's first hope. If nothing happened at all, he would go on down and explain that he had made the former king powerless, and now spared his life. The second hope was fainter. The instrument had bewildered its possessor. The king actually hadn't known which end was which. And Tony had told him quite truthfully, as far as television was concerned, that one looked in the large end of such tubes as the conical glass object he saw. Now, gasping for breath, he hoped very fervently that his advice would be taken, and that it would be bad. He recalled very vaguely that a television tube works because it shoots a beam of electrons from the small end against the large end. If the antique instrument worked in anything like the same fashion, whatever detonated *djinns* would come out of the large end, too. And if the *djinn* king happened to be looking into that end when he turned on the instrument…

Very high and far away, it seemed that the heavens burst. One splash of awful flame flashed into being, not directly overhead but near the horizon. The fugitives had not only put themselves as high as possible—a hundred miles perhaps—but had gone other hundreds of miles to one side so that as much sheer distance as they could manage

would lie between them and the inferno they expected to create.

The first flash only dwindled when there was a second, and then two more, and then three. They went off soundlessly, but like firecrackers set off by the same fuse. And very high up indeed, in the icy chill of the heights, Tony found himself unbearably hot. Six or seven *djinns* breaking down in atomic explosions, even at two or three hundred miles distance, make for high-temperature effects. And Tony knew, then, that the apparatus which would destroy *djinns* had been blown to atoms along with the atoms it had blown up. The *djinn* king had, after all, been looking into the muzzle of an atomic gun when he pulled its trigger to destroy his subjects.

Abdul said happily:

"You found them, Majesty! Now none will question your right to reign!"

Without orders, he began a swift, slanting descent. In the thicker air, Tony's feelings of weakness ceased. But something else occurred to him. He reflected gloomily that nothing ever happens just right. No achievement is completely satisfying. Each one creates new worries and new troubles.

At five thousand feet, Abdul said:

"Majesty!"

"What?" asked Tony.

"You will marry the Queen of Barkut?" asked Abdul. "It seems the logical thing to do. May I begin to make plans for the wedding, Majesty?"

"Marry the Queen?" Tony shook his head. His new apprehensions hit him hard. "No! I'm not thinking of the Queen when I worry about what the gamma rays from those explosions may have done to me! Not a bit of it! I'm thinking of somebody else entirely!"

Chapter 19

The arrival of the *djinn* caravan created terror in Barkut. Practically the whole *djinn* nation—Tony learned that he had something over a hundred thousand subjects—came steaming out of the vastness which was the desert. The whirlwind scouts were sighted from the city walls. The aircraft curtain of rocs was sighted at the same time. When the caravan deployed before the city walls, fires of sulphurous material burned on the battlements, the city's last supply of *lasf* had been served out, and the people of Barkut were prepared to defend themselves to the last drop of ragweed solution.

There were the same people who only one day before had fired off cannon and danced in the streets to celebrate the defeat of a single *djinn* in Tony's bedroom. Now, prepared for destruction, when they learned that the *djinns* came not for conquest but as a guard of honor for the returned Queen of Barkut, that the Lord Toni who had gone away with only one slave girl for company had returned as King of the *Djinns,* there was no possible way to express their enthusiasm.

Abdul, bustling about, supervised the instant erection of a palace for Tony's lodging. It was simple enough, of course. He had merely to sketch the outline of a modest little overnight hut of some two hundred and forty rooms with floors of alternating gold and ivory squares, windows of sapphire and emerald and ruby, and a roof of jade and silver bearing fountains that sprayed milk, wine, honey, and diamond dust. Some three hundred *djinns* apportioned the structure among themselves, transformed themselves into the necessary sections and decorations, and the thing was done. It was waiting for Tony when he came back from his visit to the city of Barkut.

"Majesty!" said Abdul happily. "We were worried that you might not be adequately served in Barkut. You should at least have let a few hundred of your servants go before you with golden basins filled with jewels and the like."

"I am," said Tony, "a person of simple tastes. I came back mainly to give orders for tight discipline in the *djinn* camp tonight. I don't want anybody sneaking into the human town. No matter how innocently, no matter how inconspicuously! Nobody is to wander in as a little centipede. Nobody is to be a little beetle or a fly or a grease spot or a moth's egg. The human city is off-limits! Understand?"

"Yes, Majesty!" said Abdul. "And you will return—?"

"I sleep in Barkut," said Tony firmly. "There are some negotiations to be made. I'm quite safe. Hm… have you talked to Nasim about your marriage?"

"Yes, Majesty." Here Abdul wore the expression of a cat

completely filled with cream and canaries. “We are quite agreed. Er… Majesty, you are not offended that I wore a costume and form resembling yours for—ah—courtship?”

“As long as you wear that form strictly in private,” said Tony. “For the admiration of nobody but Nasim, and as long as you keep Nasim from bothering me, it’s all right. Why don’t you get married tonight?”

“To hear is to obey, Majesty!”

“You can use the palace I won’t be sleeping in, for a honeymoon cottage,” said Tony enthusiastically. “If you like, I’ll bring the Queen and her court out for the wedding!”

“Your Majesty is too good!” protested Abdul ecstatically.

“Then it’s settled—” Tony paused apprehensively. “You’ll see that Nasim wears clothes while she’s in human form?”

“Yes, Majesty,” Abdul beamed. “May I ask about your Majesty’s plans for this evening?”

“There’s a banquet,” said Tony, frowning, “and your wedding. And—the negotiations. If the negotiations are successful, I shall be engaged to be married and my plans are none of your business.”

“It is unthinkable,” Abdul assured him, “that your Majesty’s desires should be opposed by any creature under the sky! But in such an impossible event—”

“Music—” said Tony glumly. “And in that case my plans are even less of your business! But remember, Barkut is off-limits for *djinns!”*

Abdul bowed to the ground.

* * *

Tony went back into the city. It was very pleasant to have all the people smile at him joyously. It was not too uncomfortable to have the men bow to him, at once respectfully and with the joy of human beings who feel a share in the feat of another human who has become King of the *Djinns.* It wasn’t bad having large, lustrous eyes look warmly at him over traditional Moslem women’s veils. And there was a melancholy satisfaction in going back to his old quarters in the palace—though he had occupied them only one night—to find Esir and Esim waiting for him in the most incredible excitement. They kissed him soundly.

“Indeed, lord—Your Majesty,” said Esir, laughing, “you cannot protest, because by custom any slave may kiss her master when he performs a feat so that she gives thanks to Allah that she belongs to

him and no other! King of the *Djinns,* no less! Tell me, are the *djinnees* beautiful?"

"Do you think you will prefer them to us?" asked Esim anxiously. "Indeed, lord—Your Majesty, we heard the news but an hour since, and we are fearful that you will not wish to keep us!"

Tony looked at them with a gloomy satisfaction.

"Things could be worse," he said. "For a little while I cannot tell you my plans, but whatever they turn out to be, I will bear you in mind. Oh, definitely I will bear you in mind! *Nil desperandum* will be my motto."

A tentative knock came at the door. They untangled themselves reluctantly from his embrace. It was a male slave.

"Majesty, the Queen of Barkut begs your attendance in the throne room."

"Coming up," said Tony with a sigh. To the two girls he said in comforting dejection, "I'm afraid I'll be right back."

He followed the slave to the great throne room he had seen once before, with the decrepit Council of Regency in session. The black marble floor was the same, and the brass zodiacal signs sunk into it. It occurred to Tony that life would be wearing in a house of which all interior and exterior features were subject to change without notice. There would be other disadvantages, too.

The great throne was occupied, now. The Queen sat on it. Soldiers in baggy trousers, wearing slippers and carrying flintlock guns, regarded Tony with the affection of men who have expected to fight a losing battle against the *djinns,* and now find that they can stay comfortably at home with their families. The courtiers of Barkut regarded him with no less approval. The Queen sat composed and non-committal on her throne.

"Majesty," said the Queen sedately, as Tony came to a stop before her, "we wish to offer you the thanks of the humans of Barkut for our liberation, and for the liberation of the nation from the fear of the *djinns.* We wish to express our admiration and our affection. We wish to ask if there is anything which it is in our power to do, which will add to your satisfaction or happiness."

Tony looked uneasily around. He did not see Ghail.

"I told you today, in the letter," he said awkwardly, "that if by any means I could secure the freedom of the slave girl Ghail, that I would wish to do that. If you will make her no longer a slave—"

The Queen nodded toward a side door. It opened. Two male slaves escorted Ghail to the dais before the throne. She was very pale. The Queen addressed her gently:

"His Majesty the King of the *Djinns* has asked your freedom as the price of his aid to us. He desires also to marry you."

Ghail's lips moved a little, but she did not look at Tony.

"Majesty," said the Queen, to him, "we can refuse you nothing. I make the slave girl Ghail free on one condition. If she does not marry you, she becomes again a slave. You would not impose that condition, but we can do no less!"

"But dammit—" began Tony indignantly.

"I—I can have no choice," said Ghail almost inaudibly. "I—I will marry him."

But she looked bitterly resigned. Tony bent over to her. She turned her face away. He whispered urgently:

"Damn it! Go through with it! I'll divorce you before we leave this hall. As I understand it, all that's necessary is for me to say 'I divorce you' three times and the trick's done!"

She jerked her head about to look at him, her eyes wide. Then she flushed.

"Your hands?" said the Queen briskly. "The *cadi* is here. He will marry you now. At once. Immediately."

A venerable figure pushed his way forward. The ceremony began. Ghail was very quiet, but her voice was firm. The formula was strange to Tony, and he did not know when it was finished.

But suddenly it was—and the Queen was laughing delightedly!

"Now, then! Majesty, the people of Barkut have been told only since my return that I am not their real queen! When I was kidnapped by the King of the *Djinns* he believed me the queen, and Ghail yonder was but a child. I am actually Ghail's aunt, and it seemed best to pose as the ruler of Barkut lest I be strangled and Ghail herself kidnapped and subjected to the *djinn* king's demands. A child might have been frightened into obedience. I—was otherwise.

"And so, while I posed as a captive Queen, Ghail remained among her people in disguise, learning the duties of queenship and also coming to know her people as few rulers do. The Council of Regency took its commands from her. And now that the King of the *Djinns* is also our friend and moreover a human being, it is right and fitting and proper that she return to her throne. And the kingdom of the *djinns* and the human kingdom of Barkut is now one nation, and there is now no reason for battle or anything but peace and joy."

Cannon began to boom outside. There was uproar. The audience hall itself filled with noise. And as Tony stood utterly stupefied, the erstwhile Queen stood up and beckoned to Ghail. And Ghail held Tony's hand fast and pulled him after her as she mounted to her throne. She pulled him firmly down beside her on it. It was a close fit, though not quite as close as the fit in the camel cabin, and it felt very pleasant.

The noise still continued. Presently Tony, still dazed, whispered

into Ghail's ear:

"But—you didn't have to do it this way! If you were willing to marry me, why didn't you just tell me so?"

Ghail smiled composedly down at the cheering people in the throne room. She said fiercely under her breath:

"We'd have been engaged, and it might have been weeks before we got married! And do you think I'd trust you another night in any *djinn* palace with all those hussies trying to gain your favors since you're their king? Or do you think I'd trust you with Esir and Esim either?"

Tony said feebly:

"Oh-h-h…" and then he said, "I—I'll have to send them word I won't be home tonight."

Then he cheered up as the celebration began.

Chapter 20

It was late. The royal bridal party had graciously attended the *djinn* wedding of Nasim and Abdul in the palace outside the city walls. They had returned. Cannon still boomed. There were bonfires in the streets, and dancing, and joy was being expressed in all possible fashions, including the indecorous.

But in the royal palace of Barkut the last chamberlain bowed out, the last slave-in-waiting departed, and Tony closed the door firmly. He said:

"Er—Ghail, did I remember to send word to Esir and Esim that I wouldn't be home tonight?"

"Whether you did or not," Ghail told him, "I did!"

He took out his cigarette case. He snapped it open. He began to prowl about the bridal chamber, blowing on the wick. A faint but perceptible aroma of *lasf* became noticeable. Ghail watched him, uncomprehending and embarrassed.

"Why do you do that, Tony?" she asked.

"Oh, it's a sort of custom in my country," said Tony awkwardly. "We don't use *lasf,* of course. We use something else. It keeps away flies and mosquitoes. But I'm using this to keep away *djinns."*

* * *

It was again night. Tony Gregg got out of a taxicab on lower East Broadway, in the Syrian quarter of New York, and paid off the driver. He helped a very pretty girl to the sidewalk and led her into a *shishkebab* restaurant.

The slick-haired proprietor grinned at him as he came to take his order.

"I remember you!" he said. "Mr. Emurian wanted to buy that gold piece you had! He offered you two thousan' bucks. Ain't that right?"

"That's right," said Tony. "Have you seen him lately?"

"Oh, sure," said the proprietor. "He comes in most every night… hey! Here he comes now!"

The girl with Tony had listened, frowning in attention to the difficult English words. She looked up sharply as the bald-headed man with the impeccably tailored clothes entered. He spoke pleasantly to the proprietor, glanced at Tony, and then came quickly to his table.

"Good evening!" he said warmly, twinkling through his

eyeglasses. “I have hoped to find you again! I cabled my friend in Ispahan, and he is willing to pay you three thousand dollars for your coin!”

Tony reached in his pocket. He put down two gold pieces.

“Here are two of them,” he said. “Send them to your friend as gifts. I had rather hoped to see you again, too.” He slipped into the Arabic he had learned from Ghail. “This is my wife.” To Ghail he explained, “This is Mr. Emurian. You have heard me speak of him.”

“Oh, yes!” said Ghail. She smiled sweetly. “Tony is so grateful to you. And I also.”

“Yes,” said Tony. “I went to Barkut, you see. Met my wife there. In a sense, all due to you. And she wanted to see my world, so we came back here. I’ve a rather interesting business proposition for you. I’d like to have your friend make some contact with us in Barkut and establish a branch of his business there. It would be useful to have a regular commercial contact with this world and with the United States.”

The bald-headed Mr. Emurian sat down slowly, his face a study.

“You say that you went to Barkut?”

“Oh, yes,” said Tony briskly. “Hm… maybe I’d better sketch it out.”

He gave the spectacled man a brief, hasty, and necessarily improbable account of what had happened to him since their last meeting in this same restaurant.

“The *djinns,”* he concluded, “have some bad qualities, but their main trouble was that they could be anything they wanted, so they never learned how to make anything. I came back to get designs and pictures of all sorts of stuff. Not only statues and fashions and architecture—though I want those—but industrial products, and”—he paused—“the machines that make them. After all, a *djinn* can turn himself into a drill press as well as a beetle or a whirlwind, once he knows what a drill press is like. As a drill press he can turn out all sorts of stuff—including another drill press. And that manner of working would be congenial to them, too. They’ll like being pieces of machinery and turning out things the humans can’t make and are delighted to buy from them. Barkut ought to become a rather thriving industrial community before long.”

Mr. Emurian simply stared, batting his eyes slowly from time to time.

“I’d like to have your friend set up a branch of his business in Barkut,” said Tony earnestly. “And—well—I’d like a great deal to get an agent here in the United States, forwarding samples of new products, technical magazines, and above all pictures of everything under the sun. You could get them to Ispahan to be brought into

Barkut by whatever route your friend discovers—if you'd take the agency. Could I interest you?"

Mr. Emurian said: "Yes. Indeed you interest me. Oh, indeed yes!"

"You work out the details," said Tony. "I'm staying at the Waldorf with my wife. I brought back quite a sum in gold, and can arrange for you to draw on it. You make your plans and get your friend to arrange to get in touch with me when he finds a way to Barkut. I'll have him watched for there, and he can locate me easily enough!"

"Indeed he can!" said Ghail proudly. "My husband is His Most Illustrious Majesty, the Great in Single Combat, the Destroyer of Evil, the Protector of the Poor, the Nobly Forgiving and Compassionate, the King of *Djinns* and Men, Tony Gregg."

"Yes," said Tony abstractedly, "he can find me."

Mr. Emurian turned over the two golden coins Tony had put on the table. And suddenly his fingers trembled a little. On one side was an inscription in conventionalized Arabic script. It said that the coin was a ten-dirhim piece of Barkut. The other side showed a rather elaborate throne. But it was not empty. It was occupied by two people. One—the girl—was in some native dress of considerable grandeur, and Mr. Emurian looked twice at her. The dark-eyed, proudly smiling girl beside Tony in the *shishkebab* restaurant had plainly been the model for that figure. But he looked three times, and four, and five, at the male figure on the coin. That half of the design was a young man in a soft hat and a belted-in-the-back topcoat, with undoubtedly highly polished brown shoes. It was, in fact, Tony Gregg.

"I—will be most happy to be your American agent," said Mr. Emurian. "Er—Your Majesty!"

* * *

It was later. Much later. Tony was in his pajamas in their hotel suite.

"It's funny," said Tony thoughtfully, as Ghail looked out a window at the lighted ways and skyscrapers of New York. "It's funny that my conscience doesn't seem to bother me any more. You remember I told you about it?"

He was sipping a final highball. Ghail stared almost affrightedly at the incredible panorama before her—a city ten miles long, with millions of bright lights, with mechanisms moving swiftly along its streets, with moving electric signs everywhere and even floating overhead to the sound of motors.

"I know, Tony," said Ghail, not turning around.

"Maybe it's dead," said Tony humorously. "It used to bother me a lot."

Then his conscience spoke. Startlingly. It said smugly that it was very well satisfied with Tony, and that he could be sure that his contentment was the result of its approval. He was very normally married, he was so far reasonably faithful to his wife—though he had turned around twice, today, to look at nylon-stockinged legs—and he had become a thriving young executive.

Tony denied it indignantly. But he was! said his conscience complacently. He was the executive head of the joint kingdom of *djinns* and men of Barkut, and he was arranging for the gradual introduction of an American standard of civilization. Eventually there would be electric refrigerators, nylon stockings, fertilizer, radio, and bubble gum in Barkut. It would be the result of Tony's executive action. And he was young. So he was a young executive. So his conscience was pleased with him, and he should feel the greatest happiness possible to man, because of his conscience's approval. "Not dead," said Tony grimly, "but merely sleeping."

Ghail turned from the window.

"Tony," she said, just a little bit unhappy, "I'm homesick! This world of yours is so big! So tremendous! There are so many people! I will stay here if you wish it—"

"I think," said Tony, "we can start back day after tomorrow. All right?"

She smiled at him, warmly. He put down his glass and stood up. He put his arms around her.

"But there's one thing," he observed comfortably, "that you can't beat this world for! Ten million people all around you may be daunting, but there's one thing we've got here that we can never be sure of in Barkut! Here, my dear, we've got privacy!"

He reached up and turned off the light.